CAPTAIN AMERICA

STRACZYNSKI
MAGNO
SAIZ
GRUNDETJERN
HOLLINGSWORTH

TRYING TO COME HOME

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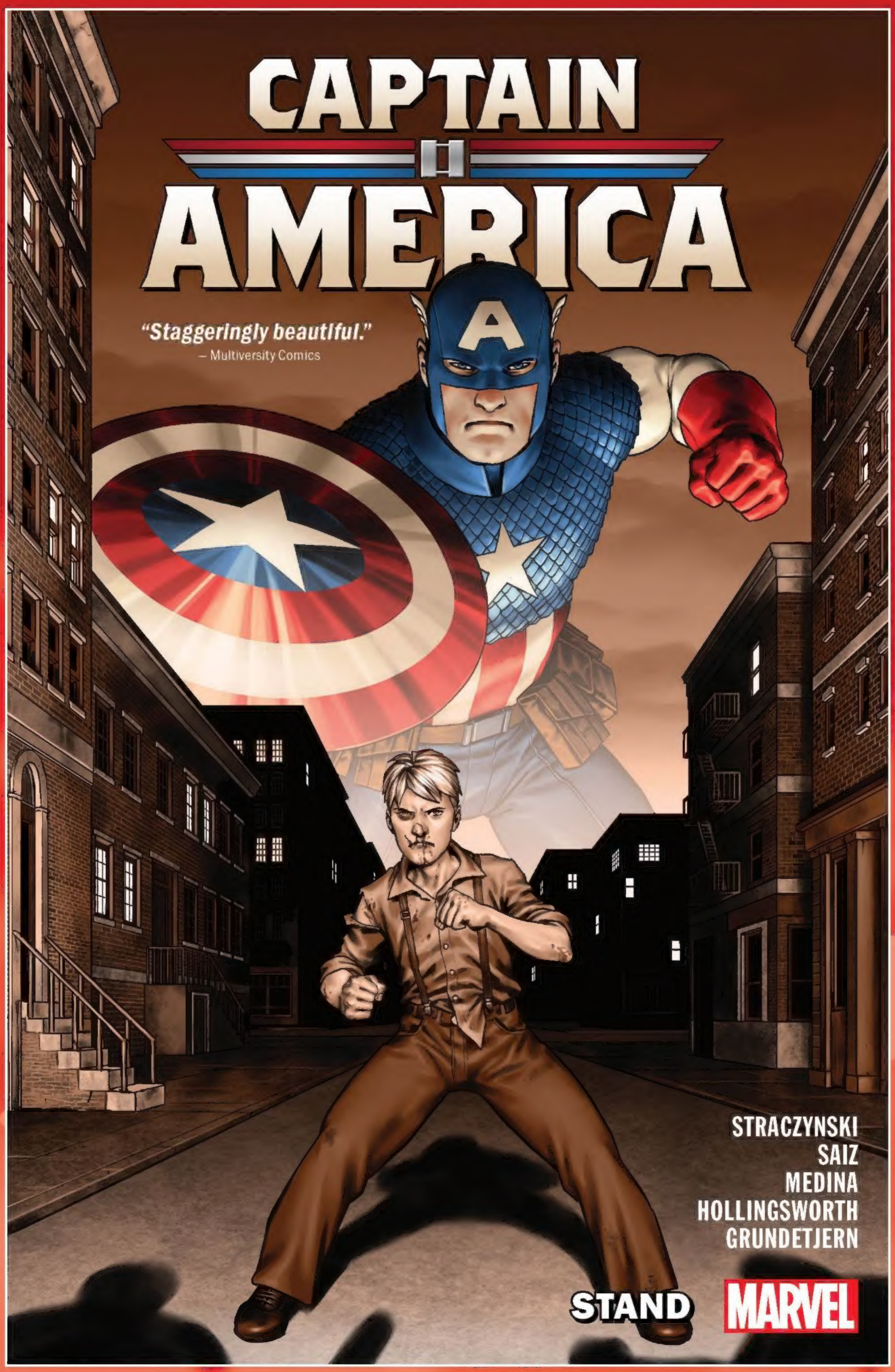

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CAPTAIN AMERICA

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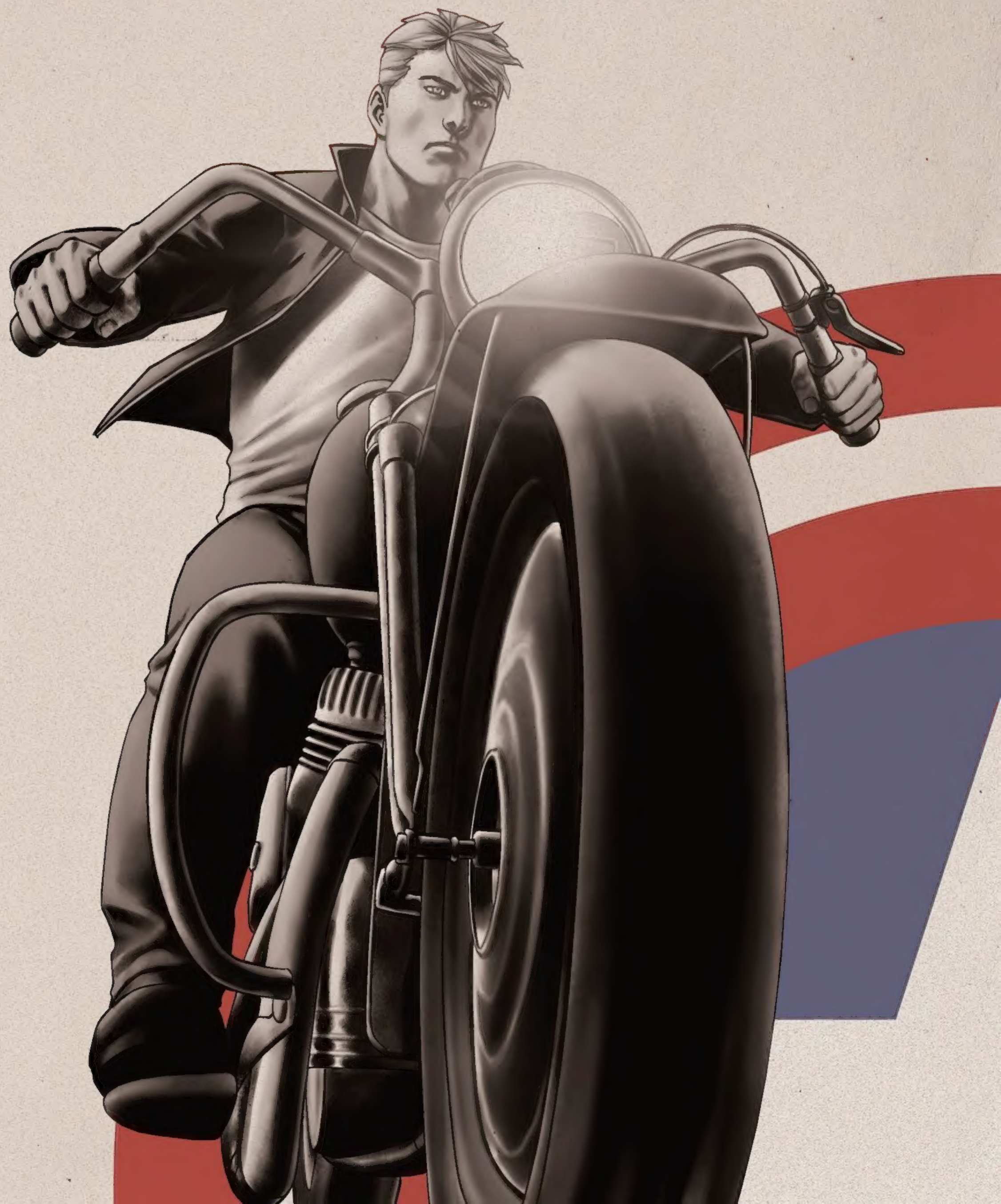

AS THE WORLD TEETERED ON THE BRINK OF GLOBAL WAR, FRAIL STEVE ROGERS ENTERED A SECRET LABORATORY AND WAS TRANSFORMED INTO THE AMERICAN SUPER-SOLDIER! FOR FIVE THRILLING YEARS, HE FOUGHT THE AXIS POWERS--UNTIL A FREAK STROKE OF FATE THREW HIM INTO SUSPENDED ANIMATION. WHEN HE AWOKE, HE WAS A MAN DECADES OUT OF HIS TIME! SINCE THAT FATEFUL DAY, STEVE ROGERS HAS SOUGHT HIS DESTINY IN THIS BRAVE NEW WORLD!

CAPTAIN AMERICA

TRYING TO COME HOME

Steve's investigation into a supernatural murder led him to a battle with the demon Asmoday, who was targeting Captain America and other change agents in order to alter the course of human history. Captain America managed to defend a peace conference against Asmoday's Emissary, a serial killer named Henry Cavenaugh, and even seemed to successfully destroy Asmoday himself. But the threat against change agents runs deeper than one king of Hell...

WRITER: **J. MICHAEL STRACZYNSKI**

ARTISTS: **CARLOS MAGNO** (#7-8) & **JESÚS SAIZ** (#9-11)

COLOR ARTISTS: **ESPEN GRUNDETJERN** (#7-8) & **MATT HOLLINGSWORTH** (#9-11)

LETTERER: **VC's JOE CARAMAGNA**

COVER ARTISTS: **TAURIN CLARKE** (#7-8, #10-11) & **JESÚS SAIZ** (#9)

ASSISTANT EDITOR: **KAITLYN LINDTVEDT**

EDITOR: **ALANNA SMITH**

CAPTAIN AMERICA CREATED BY **JOE SIMON** & **JACK KIRBY**

COLLECTION EDITOR: **DANIEL KIRCHHOFFER**

TALENT RELATIONS SPECIALIST: **LISA MONTALBANO**

DIRECTOR, PRODUCTION & SPECIAL PROJECTS: **JENNIFER GRÜNWALD**

VP PRODUCTION & SPECIAL PROJECTS: **JEFF YOUNGQUIST**

BOOK DESIGNERS: **SARAH SPADACCINI** WITH **KAT WALKINGTON**

MANAGER & SENIOR DESIGNER: **ADAM DEL RE**

LEAD DESIGNER: **JAY BOWEN**

SVP PRINT, SALES & MARKETING: **DAVID GABRIEL**

SR. MANAGER, DIGITAL: **TIM SMITH 3**

DIGITAL PRODUCTION: **MEGHAN O'LEARY** & **RACHEL YOUNG**

EDITOR IN CHIEF: **C.B. CEBULSKI**

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CAPTAIN AMERICA

INTERMEZZO PART ONE OF TWO | №7

WELL, IT'S DONE.

EVERY NAIL HAS BEEN NAILED, EVERY SCREW HAS BEEN SCREWED, EVERY LOOSE BOARD HAS BEEN HAMMERED DOWN AND EVERY BIT OF CHROME OR BRASS HAS BEEN POLISHED OR REPLACED.

EVERYTHING'S BACK TO THE WAY IT *SHOULD* BE...THE WAY IT WAS WHEN I LIVED HERE AS A KID WITH MY *MOTHER.*

AND I FEEL LIKE I'VE FINALLY REACHED SOME *PEACE* WITH ALL THAT.

MAYBE WE *BOTH* HAVE.

I DECIDE TO GO ACROSS THE STREET FOR A BETTER LOOK. BECAUSE SOMETIMES YOU HAVE TO GO FARTHER *AWAY* FROM SOMETHING BEFORE YOU CAN SEE IT FOR WHAT IT ACTUALLY *IS.*

THE CLOSER YOU GET TO THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS, THE LESS YOU ACTUALLY *SEE* THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS.

BETTER.

PERFECT.

THEN SOMETHING HAPPENS. SOMETHING THAT *SHOULDN'T* HAPPEN...THAT CAN'T *POSSIBLY* HAPPEN.

THE WINDOW ON THE SECOND FLOOR... THAT'S WHERE SHE WATCHED YOU GO TO SCHOOL EVERY MORNING, ISN'T IT?

BUT IT HAPPENS ANYWAY.

I DON'T TURN AROUND. NOT YET. PROCESSING. SEE, THERE ARE TWO REASONS WHY THIS IS IMPOSSIBLE.

FIRST, BECAUSE I'VE ONLY EVER TOLD THAT STORY *ONCE* IN MY ENTIRE LIFE, AND THE MAN I TOLD IT TO HAS BEEN DEAD FOR OVER THIRTY YEARS.

AND SECOND--

--THE BREEZEWAY I'M STANDING IN WAS *EMPTY* WHEN I GOT HERE, THERE'S NO OTHER WAY IN, AND NO WAY ANYONE, AND I MEAN *ANYONE*, COULD HAVE GOTTEN PAST ME WITHOUT BEING SEEN.

SO WHO'S AT THE OTHER END OF THE VOICE THAT JUST ASKED THAT QUESTION, AND HOW DID SHE GET THERE?

HOW DO YOU KNOW THAT?

I WAS THERE.

HIGHLY DOUBTFUL.

SHE LOVED YOU, YOU KNOW. MORE THAN--

--WELL, *LIFE ITSELF.*

UH-HUH.

AND WHO ARE *YOU?*

NOT REALLY PAYING ATTENTION, ARE YOU?

A NAME.

YOU CAN CALL ME *LYRA.*

I CAN *CALL* YOU THAT, BUT IS THAT YOUR *NAME?*

NAMES ARE ARBITRARY, JUST *SOUNDS* IMPOSED UPON US BY OTHERS BEFORE OUR SOULS AND BODIES ARE EVEN FORMED.

WHAT YOU'RE ASKING ISN'T *WHO* I AM, BUT *WHAT* I AM.

FINE.

WHAT ARE YOU?

AND SHE TOLD ME.

PROVE IT.

I SAID.

AND SHE DID.

SO, WHAT DO YOU WANT?

YOUR HELP.

WHY ME?

BECAUSE OF WHO YOU WERE. WHO YOU ARE. AND WHO YOU WILL *BECOME.*

SHE HANDS ME A SHEET OF PAPER SHE WASN'T HOLDING A SECOND EARLIER.

COME TO THIS ADDRESS TONIGHT. MIDNIGHT. YOU'LL UNDERSTAND.

AND IF YOU *ARE* WHO YOU *SAY* YOU ARE, WHY DO *YOU* NEED HELP?

COME TO THE *FRONT DOOR* TONIGHT AND FIND OUT.

AFTER ALL, YOU WON'T HAVE ANY OTHER PLANS FOR MIDNIGHT.

HMPH.

"SO, ANYTHING INTERESTING GOING ON?"

I DECIDE TO TRY AN EXPERIMENT. TO GET TO THE ADDRESS LYRA GAVE ME, I'LL HAVE TO LEAVE MY PLACE BY 11:30 P.M.

NAH... NOTHING MUCH, REALLY, SAM. YOU?

NOTHING. DEAD. DEADER THAN DEAD. WHATEVER THAT WOULD BE. DEAD-PLUS, MAYBE. DEAD-SQUARED.

TOTALLY GET THAT.

IT'S 10:25. THE MOVIE SAM PICKED ENDS AT 11:45.

YOUR SERVE, LYRA.

WHY DO THE ACTION SCENES IN THESE BIG MOVIES ALWAYS LOOK FAKE?

TOO MUCH CGI. THE EYE CAN ALWAYS TELL THE DIFFERENCE, EVEN IF YOU'RE NOT AWARE OF IT ON A CONSCIOUS LEVEL.

10:43.

OH, COME ON--

RIGHT? MAKES NO SENSE.

THAT'S WHY I THINK WE SHOULD OPEN UP A CONSULTING FIRM FOR FOLKS MAKING SUPER-HERO MOVIES.

NOT A CHANCE. I'D RATHER DEAL WITH *HYDRA* THAN *HOLLYWOOD*. GOT TO HAVE *SOME* STANDARDS, YOU KNOW.

FAIR.

11:20.

--NO SIGN OF ENTRY? BUT WE'RE STILL GETTING MOTION? OKAY. I'M ON MY WAY.

GOTTA SPLIT, STEVE. SECURITY COMPANY I USE GOT A MOTION-DETECTOR ALERT FROM INSIDE MY APARTMENT.

IS EVERYTHING OKAY?

THEY DIDN'T SEE ANYTHING THAT LOOKS BROKEN INTO, BUT BETTER CHECK TO BE SURE. FINISH THIS ANOTHER TIME?

SURE THING.

11:25.

FIVE MINUTES TO SPARE.

OKAY. WELL, I GUESS--

--WE'RE DOING THIS.

"YO, STEVE, SAM...LEAVING THIS HERE... FINISHED CHECKING THE APARTMENT, THOUGHT YOU'D GET A LAUGH. CAT GOT IN SOMEHOW AND HAD KITTENS. MOTION DETECTOR SHOULDN'T HAVE PICKED UP SOMETHING THAT SMALL, BUT FOR SOME REASON IT DID.

"SO IF YOU KNOW SOMEBODY WHO WANTS A KITTEN, LET ME KNOW. CRAZY. LIFE POPS UP IN THE STRANGEST PLACES, YOU KNOW?"

YES, IT DOES. IT DOES INDEED.

THE NOTE SAYS PARK AROUND THE BLOCK, THEN GO DOWN THE ALLEY.

LOOKING AROUND, I WONDER HOW LONG IT'LL TAKE FOR SOMEBODY TO STEAL MY MOTORCYCLE.

THEN I FOLD DOWN A PART OF THE PAGE THAT I SWEAR WASN'T THERE EARLIER.

Don't worry your bike will be safe here.

WELL, ALL RIGHTY, THEN.

HUH...

...GUESS I FOUND THE PLACE.

HI... IS THERE A SHOW TONIGHT?
THERE'S NEVER *NOT* A SHOW TONIGHT.
IS THAT A YES?
...SURE, WHY NOT?
HOW MUCH FOR A TICKET?
ONE DOLLAR. UNLESS YOU AIN'T *GOT* A DOLLAR, THEN THERE'S NO CHARGE.
IF EVERYONE CAN JUST WALK IN *FREE*, WHY ASK FOR A *DOLLAR?*
DO I *LOOK* TO YOU LIKE A GUY WITH ANSWERS?
WELL, NOW THAT YOU MENTION IT--
DO I LOOK TO YOU LIKE A GUY WHO ASKS A LOT OF *QUESTIONS?*
NO, NOT REALLY.
SO YOU WANT A *TICKET* OR *NOT?*
YES.
I ONLY HAVE A FIVER. DO YOU HAVE CHANGE?
DO I *LOOK* TO YOU LIKE A GUY WHO HAS--?
NEVER MIND...KEEP THE CHANGE FOR THE *NEXT* FOUR PEOPLE WHO DON'T ACTUALLY NEED IT.
THANKS, CHIEF. HAVE A GOOD SHOW.
WHAT THE HELL HAVE I GOTTEN MYSELF--
...INTO...?

I AM
HIYA...

...WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO SHOW YOU TO YOUR SEAT?

I...UM... DON'T KNOW MY SEAT NUMBER.

THAT'S OKAY, I DO! I KNOW *EVERYBODY'S* SEAT NUMBER!

SO YOU WORK HERE?

OH, SURE! I'VE BEEN HERE FOR A LONG TIME! I KNOW EVERY INCH OF THIS PLACE LIKE I KNOW THE BACK OF MY WINGS!

EXCEPT ***BACKSTAGE.*** I'VE NEVER BEEN BACKSTAGE. THEY KEEP TELLING ME I'LL BE ALLOWED TO GO THERE ONE OF THESE DAYS, BUT SO FAR, NOPE.

MAYBE TOMORROW THOUGH. WE'LL SEE!

HERE YOU GO. ONE ON THE AISLE. WOULD YOU LIKE A PROGRAM?

SURE.

WAIT...THIS ONE'S BLANK--

THEY ALL ARE. DESCRIPTIONS APPEAR AS THE PROGRAM GROWS, BECAUSE IT'S NEVER THE SAME TWICE. THAT WAY YOU KNOW WHAT YOU'VE SEEN.

ENJOY THE SHOW.

HEY--

--MY NAME'S TERESA! THERE'RE A FEW MINUTES BEFORE THE SHOW STARTS--WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO DO YOUR ASTROLOGICAL CHART?

...SURE, WHY NOT?

EXCELLENT! FIVE BUCKS! WHAT'S YOUR BIRTHDATE?

SEPTEMBER 28--

LIBRA! GREAT...CARING, SUPPORTIVE, ALL ABOUT JUSTICE AND PROTECTING PEOPLE--

--1922.

I'LL... BE RIGHT BACK.

WHAT? HE'S WHO?

I'M SO SORRY, I DIDN'T KNOW! I'LL DO YOUR CHART FOR FREE--

IT'S OKAY--

COULD I GET YOUR AUTOGRAPH?

SIGH

TERESA, C'MON, IT'S STARTING!

OKAY--

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN AND ALL STOPS IN BETWEEN...

BEINGS AND NON-BEINGS... MUNDANES AND MUTANTS...THE LOST, THE HOPING TO BE FOUND AND THE HOPING TO DISAPPEAR...TO ALL THE SOULS WHO ENTERED HERE TONIGHT SEEKING SHELTER FROM THE STORM...

WELCOME... TO THE *FRONT* DOOR.

FOR ANYONE *NEW* IN THE CROWD--

--ASSUMING YOU CAN *CALL* THIS A CROWD--

--LEAVE YOUR *WARS* AND YOUR *TEMPERS* AND YOUR *VIOLENCE* OUTSIDE.

YOU KNOW HOW PEOPLE SAY, "CHECK YOUR EGO AT THE *FRONT DOOR*"? WELL, THIS IS WHAT THEY HAD IN MIND EVEN IF THEY DIDN'T HAVE IT IN MIND.

THERE IS NO PAIN HERE. NO STRUGGLE. NO VIOLENCE.

AND NO *DEATH.*

BECAUSE WE'RE UNDER PROTECTION, AREN'T WE?

YOU *BET* WE ARE.

LET THERE BE NIGHT!

I'VE SEEN SHOWS LIKE THIS BEFORE. MOST OF THEM INVOLVED TRICKS. BUT THERE ARE NO TRICKS HERE.

WHAT THEY'RE DOING, THEY'RE DOING.

AND WHAT THEY'RE DOING IS BEAUTIFUL.

IT'S NOT JUST TRICKS, THEY TELL A STORY ABOUT WHAT IT IS TO BE ISOLATED AND ALONE.

TO FEAR BEING WITH SOMEONE ELSE BECAUSE THEY MIGHT GET HURT.

I HEAR A SONG IN NOTES NO ONE HAS EVER HEARD BEFORE...SAD BUT HOPEFUL...

AND AS EVERY LINE IS FINISHED, I CAN'T REMEMBER WHAT WENT BEFORE IT. A SONG ABOUT HOW WE LOSE WHAT WE CHERISH MOST, AND TIME STEALS ALL.

ACT AFTER ACT, PERFORMANCE AFTER PERFORMANCE, EACH TELLING A STORY THAT CANNOT BE COMMUNICATED IN WORDS, ONLY UNDERSTOOD ON A VISCERAL LEVEL, IN THE LANGUAGE OF THE SOUL.

A COMEDIAN TELLS JOKES IN A LANGUAGE COMPLETELY UNKNOWN TO ME AND THE REST OF THE AUDIENCE... BUT SOMEHOW, WE UNDERSTAND EVERY WORD.

THE JOKES ARE HYSTERICAL, BUT NO ONE'S LAUGHING BECAUSE WE'RE STUNNED BY THE INTELLIGENCE BEHIND THEM. REVEALED TRUTH HAS A WAY OF DOING THAT.

AND THEY ARE BEAUTIFUL. ALL OF THEM. BEAUTIFUL.

Sparks Fly.
Don't Let Me Hurt You.
Solitude.
Upside-Down Love.
My Hand to My Heart.
A Musical Interlude.
Smart Laughs.
The Rest of Me
A Surpris

I'M SORRY TO PULL YOU AWAY, BUT CAN YOU COME WITH ME?

IS THERE A PROBLEM?

SHE'S WAITING FOR YOU.

WAITING TO TAKE YOU BACKSTAGE.

JUST A LITTLE MORE...

THIS IS AS FAR AS I CAN GO.

YOU'RE NOT COMING?

I HAVEN'T BEEN INVITED.

WELCOME TO THE *PALE CITY.*

BEFORE IT WAS ***DESTROYED,*** THE CITY WAS AS OLD AS THE UNIVERSE, OLDER EVEN THAN CREATION ITSELF.

WHAT HAPPENED TO IT?

MY ***BROTHER*** HAPPENED TO IT.

HE IS NOT ***LITERALLY*** MY BROTHER, BUT THAT IS THE ONLY WAY TO EXPLAIN IT TO ONE WHO WAS NOT THERE. TO GET ANY CLOSER TO THE TRUTH WOULD DESTROY YOUR MIND. HE IS MY OPPOSITE.

LIFE...AND DEATH?

GO NO FURTHER. FOR YOUR OWN GOOD.

HOW CAN I BE IN UNIFORM? I DIDN'T BRING IT--

EVEN WHEN YOU'RE NOT WEARING IT, YOU'RE WEARING IT. YOU CARRY IT INSIDE. I JUST PULLED IT OUT.

DID YOU ENJOY THE SHOW?

YES. THEY'RE AMAZING. THEY'RE--

VULNERABLE. HUNTED. AND IN TERRIBLE DANGER.

AS THERE WAS ONCE A *PALE CITY*, THERE HAS ALWAYS BEEN A *FRONT DOOR* FOR THE SPECIAL ONES, THOSE WHO CAN MAKE THE WORLD A BETTER AND MORE BEAUTIFUL PLACE.

CHANGE AGENTS.

YES.

I BELIEVE YOU'VE HEARD THAT TERM RECENTLY.

"THERE IS A CHANGE COMING, STEVEN. A NEXUS POINT. YOU KNOW IT BECAUSE YOU FOUGHT THOSE WHO WOULD STOP IT. THAT CHANGE WILL FLOW DIRECTLY THROUGH THIS PLACE."

DURING THAT FIGHT, YOUR VIBRANIUM-ALLOY SHIELD ABSORBED SOME RATHER VAST ENERGIES AT THE MOMENT YOU DESTROYED ASMODAY. SO IN YOUR WORLD IT LOOKS LIKE THAT. BUT HERE--

--IT WILL ALWAYS LOOK LIKE *THIS.*

AND MY THOUGHTS RETURN TO QUANTUM MOMENTS.

RIGHT NOW, I'M STANDING HERE. RIGHT NOW, I'M HAVING THIS CONVERSATION. RIGHT NOW, I'M BEING BORN.

RIGHT NOW, I'M DYING.

MY BROTHER WAS NOT ALWAYS AS HE IS NOW.

HE WAS BEAUTIFUL ONCE. HIS TASK WAS NECESSARY, BUT HE TEMPERED IT WITH ***KINDNESS.***

UNTIL HE WENT MAD.

WHAT HAPPENED?

"MY BROTHER WAS USED TO DEATH IN SMALL NUMBERS, DONE QUICKLY AND OVER. BUT WHEN MURDER BECAME A ***MACHINE*** AND THAT MACHINE DEVOURED SOULS BY THE ***TENS*** OF ***THOUSANDS*** EVERY DAY, YEAR AFTER YEAR--

"--AND WHEN VAST NUMBERS WERE ERASED IN A FLICKER OF A SECOND--

"--IT WAS MORE THAN HIS MIND COULD BEAR, AND HE DESCENDED SLOWLY, GRADUALLY, INTO MADNESS. WHICH LED TO A DECISION--"

--THAT THE HUMAN RACE NEEDED TO START OVER. HE DECIDED THAT HIS TASK WAS TO HIT THE *RESET* BUTTON. THE OTHERS IN THE PALE CITY TRIED TO STOP HIM--

"--THEY REALIZED, IN THEIR LAST MOMENTS, THAT THE POWER THEY HAD UNLEASHED WAS NOW TOO GREAT FOR THEM TO STOP.

"WHICH IS WHY THAT TASK NOW FALLS TO *US.*"

FOR A LONG TIME, THE FRONT DOOR WAS SIMPLY A PLACE TO CELEBRATE LIFE.

BUT NOW IT HAS BECOME A LAST-DITCH DEFENSE AGAINST DEATH ITSELF.

"WITH THE DESTRUCTION OF ASMODAY, WHO WAS AT THE RIGHT HAND OF MY BROTHER FOR A VERY LONG TIME, HE HAS BEGUN SENDING OUT HIS FORCES TO TEST OUR DEFENSES. LOOKING FOR WEAK SPOTS.

"AND TONIGHT, THEY WILL MAKE THEIR FIRST MAJOR MOVE."

BUT BETWEEN THE TWO OF US, THEY WILL GET FAR MORE THAN THEY BARGAINED FOR.

WHAT MAKES YOU SO SURE I'LL SIGN UP?

I WATCHED YOU FROM THE WINGS, STEVEN. I KNOW WHEN SOMEONE IS FALLING IN LOVE WITH THIS PLACE.

THAT'S WHY I WANTED YOU TO COME. WHY I WANTED YOU TO *SEE.*

I DON'T KNOW WHAT WILL HAPPEN TONIGHT, STEVEN. HE WILL NOT ***DESTROY*** ME BECAUSE HE NEEDS ME FOR THERE TO BE A REBORN WORLD. BUT THERE ARE OTHER THINGS HE CAN DO TO ME, TO GET ME OUT OF THE WAY.

THAT IS WHY I NEED SOMEONE TO JOIN THE BATTLE, NOT JUST TO PROTECT THOSE YOU SAW TONIGHT, BUT TO ENSURE THAT THE OTHERS ON THEIR WAY HERE ARRIVE SAFELY.

IN THE PAST, IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN MY BURDEN AND MY JOY TO ESCORT THEM HERE, BUT AS THE ATTACKS GROW MORE FREQUENT, I CAN'T RISK BEING AWAY WHEN THE NEXT ONE COMES. BECAUSE IF I CAN'T GET BACK IN TIME, ALL OF THIS, AND ALL OF ***THEM***, WILL BE GONE.

WE'RE WAITING FOR SOMEONE, STEVEN. I DON'T KNOW WHO IT IS. I CAN SEE ONLY A SILHOUETTE. YOU WILL KNOW HIM WHEN YOU SEE HIM. WHEN THE TIMES COMES, YOU HAVE TO BRING HIM HERE SAFELY...FOR THE SAKE OF THE FUTURE.

THEY ARE COMING... DO YOU FEEL IT?

IF MY BROTHER SHOULD COME INTO THE FIGHT, DO NOT LOOK AT HIM DIRECTLY. IT IS MORE THAN ANY MORTAL CAN WITHSTAND. PEER ONLY THROUGH THE CRYSTAL OF YOUR SHIELD.

READY?

ALWAYS.

THEN IT BEGINS.

№8 | **INTERMEZZO** PART TWO OF TWO

ALL MY LIFE, I'VE HEARD PEOPLE TALK ABOUT *DEATH INCARNATE.*

IT'S BEEN IN BOOKS, TV SHOWS, POEMS, MOVIES LIKE *DEATH TAKES A HOLIDAY* AND THAT AWFUL ONE WITH BRAD PITT THAT I CAN NEVER REMEMBER BECAUSE WE FORGET THAT WHICH GIVES US PAIN.

BUT I CAN'T REMEMBER ANYONE EVER TALKING ABOUT *LIFE INCARNATE.*

SO EITHER LYRA'S DONE A REALLY GOOD JOB OF COVERING HER FOOTSTEPS, OR WE HAVEN'T BEEN PAYING ATTENTION TO THE BATTLEFIELD.

The Pale City.

IN FRONT OF US... THE ARM OF THAT DEATH.

The Front Door.

AND BEHIND US: THE LOST AND THE DISCARDED...THE THROWNAWAYS AND THE RUNAWAYS, WITH NOTHING MORE THAN HOPE FOR A BETTER WORLD AND MAYBE, JUST MAYBE, THE POWER TO BACK IT UP.

BECAUSE SOMETIMES IT'S THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE THAT HAVE THE BEST CHANCE TO CHANGE THE FUTURE.

AND BETWEEN THE TWO SIDES... JUST US.

SAME AS IT'S EVER BEEN.

THESE CREATURES... ARE THEY ALIVE?

NO...

THEY ARE LONG DEAD. WHEN THEY LIVED HERE IN THE *PALE CITY*, I KNEW THEM AS FRIENDS. ALLIES.

LOVERS.

THEY WOULD NOT WANT THE *DUST* AND *PAIN* THAT NOW STANDS IN FOR THEIR BODIES USED IN THIS WAY. THEY WOULD WANT AN *END* TO THIS OBSCENITY.

SO YOU NEED NOT HOLD ANYTHING BACK.

THAT'S ALL I NEEDED TO KNOW.

I MAY NOT BE AS STRONG AS *SPIDER-MAN*, BUT I CAN STILL SLAM SOMEONE'S RIB CAGE OUT THE OTHER SIDE OF THEIR BACK. SO I TRY TO PULL MY PUNCHES WHERE I CAN. BUT NOW--

--I DON'T HAVE TO.

AND AS I TURN, I REALIZE THAT IN ADDITION TO A CRYSTAL COMPOSITION, MY SHIELD--

--HAS JUST HAD AN UPGRADE. I CAN FEEL IT RESPONDING TO MY NEEDS.

FWOOOOOSH!

LET'S GO.

WHEN I FIGHT, EVERY MOVE IS *STRATEGIC*, BORN OF DECADES OF PRACTICE.

WHEN *SHE* FIGHTS, EVERY MOVE IS A *POEM*.

BORN OF WHAT, I WONDER?

LOOKS LIKE THEY'RE RUNNING OUT OF FORCES.

RUNNING OUT? I'M AFRAID NOT, STEVEN.

THOSE WERE JUST THE *SCOUTS*.

...OH.

I SEE SOME OF THEM REACH THE ENTRANCE TO THE *FRONT DOOR*--

--AND THERE'S NOTHING I CAN DO TO STOP THEM.

YOU DON'T BELONG HERE.

LET'S EXPLAIN IT TO THEM.

I HAVE NO IDEA HOW LONG THE FIGHT GOES ON.

COULD BE HOURS.

COULD BE DAYS.

THEY START TO BREAK THROUGH. I FEEL CLAWS SLICING MY SKIN AND BLOOD RUNNING DOWN MY BACK. I KEEP GOING.

I'M TOO TIRED TO LIFT THE SHIELD.

I LIFT IT ANYWAY.

I KEEP GOING.

AND THEN FINALLY, AT LAST, THERE WAS JUST ONE.

LET ME--

NO. WAIT.

I KNOW THIS ONE.

AND I NOTICE, FOR THE FIRST TIME, THAT SHE'S BLEEDING LIGHT.

ALDUS... OH MY LOVE... SEE WHAT HE HAS DONE TO YOU.

I GIVE YOU THE ONLY GIFT I CAN.

BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM

I'M SORRY... I'M SO SORRY...

HE COMES. MY BROTHER.

I CAN--

NO. DO NOTHING. WHAT HE *IS* WAS NEVER MEANT FOR HUMAN EYES. LOOK ON HIM ONLY THROUGH THE CRYSTAL.

TO LOOK UPON HIM DIRECTLY, EVEN A PASSING *GLANCE*, CAN BE FATAL.

HE IS HERE.

IT IS GOOD TO SEE YOU AGAIN, MY SISTER.

BUT YOU MUST KNOW YOU HAVE NOT *STOPPED* WHAT MUST HAPPEN. THOSE YOU *PROTECT*. THOSE YOU WOULD HAVE *HIM* PROTECT, ARE *UNWORTHY* OF YOU AND OF HIM.

YOU HAVE ONLY SUCCEEDED IN *POSTPONING* THE *INEVITABLE*.

YOU ARE CORRECT, O MY BROTHER. BUT LET ME ASK YOU A QUESTION.

WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN *STOPPING* SOMETHING...AND AN *INFINITY* OF *POSTPONEMENTS?*

YOU WERE ALWAYS SO WISE, LYRA...AND YET ALWAYS SO FOOLISH.

AND HERE, ANOTHER CHAMPION TO LOOK AFTER HER CHILDREN.

THERE HAVE BEEN SO MANY OVER THE LONG YEARS. DID SHE TELL YOU WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM?

DID SHE TELL YOU HOW THEY DIED?

NOPE. NOT INTERESTED.

AS SOMEBODY IN ONE OF MY FAVORITE MOVIES OF ALL TIME ONCE SAID--

--"NEVER TELL ME THE ODDS."

AH, BUT THERE *ARE* NO ODDS HERE.

FOR ALL YOUR *STRENGTH*, YOU REMAIN *MORTAL*. AND ALL THAT IS MORTAL *DIES*.

WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO SHOW YOU *WHEN* AND *WHERE* AND *HOW* YOU WILL DIE?

"WOULD YOU LIKE ME TO SHOW YOU WHAT *I* SEE?"

ALL RIGHT... I'M GOING UP THERE. STAY HERE WITH THE REST. WHEN I GO DOWN, TAKE THE OTHERS AND RUN.

YOU WON'T--

DON'T ARGUE.

YOUR HAND IS SHAKING--

THAT'S HOW I KNOW WHAT I KNOW. IT HASN'T DONE THIS SINCE THAT DAY.

WHAT DAY?

RIGHT NOW, I'M GOING TO DIE.

RIGHT NOW, A LIFETIME AGO, SHE'S ABOUT TO SAY TO ME, "DON'T BELIEVE HIM, HE'S A LIAR."

AND ***RIGHT NOW,*** IN THAT MOMENT, I'M ABOUT TO MAKE A MISTAKE.

I'VE CARRIED THAT MISTAKE WITH ME FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE.

AND NOW IT'S COME ***BACK.***

AND NOW I KNOW.

TELL THE OTHERS TO GET READY. TELL THEM TO RUN FROM THIS PLACE AS FAST AND AS FAR AS THEY CAN. TELL THEM--

--TELL THEM NOT TO LOOK BACK.

"DON'T BELIEVE HIM, STEVEN--"

--HE'S A LIAR.

THEN WHAT DOES THAT MAKE YOU, SISTER? I HAVE SHOWN HIM MY TRUE FACE, AS MUCH AS IS ALLOWED. HAVE YOU?

I--

LOOK AT HER THROUGH THE CRYSTAL. SEE WHAT YOU ARE NOT SEEING.

STEVEN--

--DON'T--

STEVEN, NO! DON'T LOOK AT--

GOT YOU.

LINNNNGGGGGHHH!

STEVEN!

ARE YOU--?

MY ARM... I CAN'T MOVE... CAN'T *FEEL*... MY ARM...

A TASTE OF THE DEATH THAT IS YET TO COME IF YOU CONTINUE ON THIS PATH.

MONSTER! LUNATIC!

WHO IS THE GREATER MONSTER...I OR YOU, WHO BROUGHT HIM HERE, KNOWING WHAT MIGHT HAPPEN?

ABANDON THIS TASK, LYRA. JOIN ME IN CREATING A NEW WORLD FROM THE ASHES OF THE OLD.

EVEN IF YOU ARE THE ONE WHO *CREATES* THAT FIRE?

SOMETIMES TO CREATE A GARDEN, YOU MUST TEAR DOWN THAT WHICH IS BUILT UPON THE SOIL.

COME WITH ME, LYRA. OR SOONER OR LATER, YOU WILL FALL.

IF I FALL, HE WILL STAND.

AND IF *HE* FALLS?

HE WILL NOT.

THEN LET WHAT COMES NEXT BE ON YOUR HEAD, *SISTER*. FAREWELL--

--UNTIL THE NEXT TIME.

IS HE--?

GONE, YES, FOR NOW. I CANNOT *FIX* THE DAMAGE HERE... WE MUST GET YOU OUT WHILE THERE IS STILL TIME.

IT WAS JUST A GLIMPSE, JUST A *PIECE* OF HIM--

IT'S ENOUGH.

NO...

LYRA...

IS SHE--?

YES--

HOW LONG?

JUST A FEW MINUTES. YOU CAN STILL CALL HER *BACK* FROM THE DARKNESS. YOU CAN BREATHE *LIFE* BACK INTO HER.

YES, BUT--

YES, *BUT?*

IF I BRING HER *BACK*, IT WILL TAKE MUCH FROM ME AND I WILL HAVE LITTLE LEFT TO HEAL YOU. NOR CAN WE WAIT FOR ME TO REBUILD THAT ENERGY, BECAUSE IN A VERY LITTLE WHILE, *NOTHING* WILL HEAL THE WOUND--

TAKE CARE OF HER FIRST.

ARE YOU--?

YES. I'M SURE.

I'LL FIGHT YOU ALL AT ONCE OR ONE AT A TIME! LET'S GO!

IT'S OKAY, MARI. IT'S OVER--

DID WE WIN?

OF *COURSE* WE WON! LYRA ALWAYS WINS!

...LYRA?

IN MY LIFE, I'VE KNOWN LOVE. RECEIVED LOVE. LOST LOVE. GIVEN LOVE.

BUT UNTIL RIGHT NOW, UNTIL THIS VERY MOMENT--

--I DIDN'T KNOW LOVE COULD DO *THIS.*

EASY...EASY... THERE YOU ARE... THERE YOU ARE...

IT FEELS AS GOOD AS NEW--

YES--

SO WHERE'S THE PROBLEM?

IT WILL STAY HEALED FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE.

BUT NOT UNTIL THE *END* OF YOUR LIFE. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?

"YES... I UNDERSTAND."

CAN YOU STAY FOR THE NEXT SHOW?

NO... I SHOULD GET BACK.

BUT BEFORE I GO, I'D LIKE TO ASK YOU A QUESTION.

THERE ARE OTHERS OUT THERE A LOT MORE POWERFUL THAN I AM, AND SINCE MANY OF THESE PEOPLE ARE ***MUTANTS***--

--WHY NOT GO TO THE ***X-MEN?*** WHY NOT ***THOR*** OR ***CAPTAIN MARVEL*** OR SOMEBODY ELSE WHO CAN BRING MORE FIREPOWER TO THE JOB OF ***PROTECTING*** THEM?

BECAUSE FOR THOSE ***OTHERS***, THEIR CAUSE CAN BE AN ***EMPIRE***, A ***THRONE***, A ***WAR***.

YOU HAVE ONLY ***ONE*** CAUSE.

YOUR CAUSE IS ***LIFE.*** IT IS PRESERVING ***INNOCENT*** LIFE, AND THE INNOCENCE ***OF*** LIFE, FROM THOSE WITH ***POWER***, AND THOSE WITH ***POWERS***, WHO WOULD DESTROY THAT LIFE.

YOU HAVE ALWAYS, AND YOU ***WILL*** ALWAYS, PUT THE LIVES OF OTHERS ***FIRST.***

EVEN BEFORE YOUR OWN.

THOSE I HAVE CALLED HERE ARE THE ONES WITH THE ***POTENTIAL*** TO CHANGE THE WORLD WHEN THE ***NEXUS*** COMES.

BUT THERE ARE STILL ***FOUR MISSING...*** INCLUDING THE MOST ***PROMISING*** OF ALL.

I CAN SEE THEM ONLY ***DIMLY***...BUT ENOUGH TO POINT YOU IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION.

WHY CAN'T YOU BRING THEM IN YOURSELF?

I MUST REMAIN ***CLOSE AT HAND*** TO DEFEND THIS PLACE WHEN MY ***BROTHER*** COMES AGAIN.

BRING THOSE FOUR HERE ***SAFELY*** AND I WILL NEVER ASK ANYTHING OF YOU AGAIN.

UNTIL--?

YES.

UNTIL.

"THEY ARE TRYING TO GET HERE, WITHOUT TRULY UNDERSTANDING WHAT IS CALLING THEM.

"AND EVEN AS WE SPEAK, THEY ARE BEING HUNTED. AWAITING *HELP*. AWAITING *HOPE*. AWAITING--

"--YOU.

"AND YOUR DECISION."

HELLO? IS THIS THING ON?

YOU KNOW WHERE TO FIND ME.

THANK YOU, STEVEN. THANK--

--YOU...

MISTER ROGERS... STEVE--

I FINISHED YOUR CHART...NO CHARGE! NOT AFTER WHAT YOU DID TONIGHT!

I... THANK YOU, TERESA.

LYRA CAN TELL YOU, MY CHARTS ARE ***NEVER WRONG.*** AND THIS ONE'S REALLY GOOD.

MOSTLY...

You're a ***Libra,*** *which means you're* ***ethical, nurturing, intuitive*** *and* ***loyal*** *to those you care about. You* ***fight*** *for what you believe in.*

And you always put other people ***before*** *yourself.*

Librans are **deep thinkers**, who start off thinking everything is **black-and-white** only to figure out one day that everything's **gray**.

ENJOY THE SHOW?

YES.

COMING BACK?

COUNT ON IT.

You wear your **conscience** on your **chest** and your **heart** on your **sleeve**. And when both of those agree on the same thing--

--there's not a power in the **world** that can **stop** you.

There is **love** coming your way but not from the direction you **expect**.

Heartbreak, also. Pain. Loss. The kind of pain that would shatter anyone else.

But you get up. You **make** yourself get up. Every time. You always **have**, and you always **will**.

Right up until the day you can't.

But you'll still try.

Because obviously.

Beware the unexpected lights in the dark. Beware the friend who isn't. Beware the hand that touches.

Look to the unlikely. Embrace the impossible.

Love. Love fiercely and unwisely and without hesitation.

Love. While you still can.

"LADIES AND GENTLEMEN AND ALL STOPS IN BETWEEN...BEINGS AND NON-BEINGS...MUNDANES AND MUTANTS...THE LOST, THE HOPING-TO-BE-FOUND AND THE HOPING-TO-DISAPPEAR..."

TO ALL THE SOULS WHO ENTERED HERE TONIGHT SEEKING SHELTER FROM THE STORM... ***WELCOME TO THE FRONT DOOR!***

"THERE IS NO PAIN HERE. NO STRUGGLE. NO VIOLENCE."

AND NO ***DEATH.***

BECAUSE WE'RE UNDER PROTECTION, AREN'T WE?

YOU ***BET*** WE ARE.

"LET THERE BE LIGHT!"

CAPTAIN AMERICA

THE DESERT OF THE UNKNOWN | №9

THE ATACAMA DESERT IN CHILE IS A STUDY IN CONTRASTS. MOST OF IT IS A MASSIVE SALT FLAT MARKED BY VOLCANOES, CREATING THE DRIEST DESERT IN SOUTH AMERICA, AN INFERNO WHERE NOTHING CAN SURVIVE FOR LONG.

BUT THE COASTAL AREA IS FULL OF WILDLIFE... FLAMINGOS, LLAMAS, FOXES AND--

--PENGUINS.

SO, WHAT'RE ***YOU*** DOING ALL THE WAY OUT ***HERE?*** GET LOST? GET PICKED UP BY SOME TOURIST THEN DITCHED?

HITCHHIKING TO SAN DIEGO? ON A TOP-SECRET RECONNAISSANCE MISSION FOR YOUR FELLOW PENGUINS?

EITHER WAY, I CAN'T JUST ***LEAVE*** YOU HERE.

WELL, TECHNICALLY I ***CAN,*** BUT FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE, I'D HAVE NIGHTMARES ABOUT YOU TURNING INTO ***PENGUIN JERKY*** UNDER THE HOT SUN.

SIGH

"SO, APPARENTLY, WE'RE EXPECTED TO ***SAVE THE WORLD.***

"BUT WHEN YOU COME RIGHT DOWN TO IT, WHAT HAS THE WORLD EVER DONE FOR *US?*

THE FRONT DOOR

New York. Three Days Earlier.

"OH, SURE, WE WERE *BORN*, BUT THAT'S AS MUCH A *CURSE* AS IT IS A *BLESSING.*"

WE *FIND* LOVE, THEN WE *LOSE* LOVE. WE *RISE*, BUT THEN WE *FALL*. WE *HEAL*, BUT THEN WE *HURT*. AND THE ONLY THING WE ASK OF THE *UNIVERSE* IS JUST--

--"PLEASE DON'T LET ME DO IT ALONE."

BUT WHAT ATTRACTS US? WHAT ATTRACTS THE ONES *OUTSIDE* WHO MAKE *FUN* OF US AND *ATTACK* US AND *BLAME* US FOR EVERYTHING IN THEIR LIVES THAT HAS EVER GONE WRONG?

THEY *THINK* THEY WANT TO BE WITH THE ONE WHO IS *PERFECT* AND *SUBLIME*...

...BUT THAT MEANS BEING *RESPONSIBLE*, *KIND* AND *UNDERSTANDING*...

IT MEANS NOT *LYING*, NOT *HATING*, NOT *BLAMING*, NOT *SCAPEGOATING.*

BUT WHAT THEY *REALLY* WANT IS THE *DANGEROUS* ONE, WHO GIVES *PERMISSION* TO DO ALL THE TERRIBLE THINGS THEY HIDE FROM THE REST OF THE WORLD. THE ONE WHO CAN ACCEPT OUR *SECRET FACE*, WHO WILL NOT *TURN* FROM THEM, WHO WILL ONLY NOD AND SAY--

--"YES, GO GET THEM."

WHO ARE WE TO CHALLENGE THE KIND OF BEAUTY THAT WILL LET THE WHOLE WORLD *BURN* IF IT MEANS OUR *DESTRUCTION?*

WHO ARE WE?

WHO? ARE? WE?

THE ONLY ONES WHO CAN.

DAMN STRAIGHT. BECAUSE WE'RE THE ONLY ONES WITH NOTHING LEFT TO LOSE.

BRING ON THE BAND!

LYRA SAID SHE CAN SEE YOU NOW, STEVE, SO SHE SENT ME TO GET YOU.

WAS THERE A PROBLEM?

NO, SHE WAS WAITING UNTIL YOU SHIFTED *FOCUS*...BECAUSE SHE CAN'T *MEET WITH YOU--*

--UNTIL SHE CAN *SEE* YOU.

SO YOU *UNDERSTAND?*

AH.

NOPE. NOT A CLUE.

THE DOOR TO *BACKSTAGE* IS CLOSED WHILE WE FIX THE *DAMAGE* FROM THE BIG *FIGHT*...

...SO WE'LL HAVE TO GO THROUGH THE STAFF AREA.

MR. ROGERS? CAP?

RAOUL DUMONT... I DO THE SPIKE-THROWING ACT.

I CAUGHT YOUR ACT MY FIRST NIGHT HERE--IT WAS GREAT.

THANKS.

I JUST WANTED TO THANK YOU FOR AGREEING TO HELP US KEEP THIS PLACE ALIVE... AND US.

HAPPY TO HELP. SO WHAT'S THE FOXP2 TATTOO? IS THAT LIKE *BLINK-182?* MAROON 5? THE B-52's?

NO...IT'S JUST A CHEAP EXCUSE TO TALK ABOUT WHAT IT'S LIKE, *REALLY,* TO BE A *MUTANT.*

SEE, FOR MOST OF *HUMAN HISTORY,* WE LACKED THE CAPACITY FOR SPEECH. THEN ABOUT A HUNDRED THOUSAND YEARS AGO, THE FOXP2 GENE SHOWED UP OUT OF NOWHERE.

ANYBODY BORN WITH THAT GENE, THAT *MUTATION,* WAS ABLE TO *SPEAK* AND DEVELOP *LANGUAGE.* ANYONE WHO *DIDN'T* HAVE THAT MUTATION COULDN'T.

"THEY COULD ONLY LOOK ON AS SOME BORN AMONG THEM EVENTUALLY BEGAN MAKING *SOUNDS* THAT LET THEM *ORGANIZE* AND *PLAN* THINGS IN WAYS THAT THE OTHERS COULDN'T EVEN *BEGIN* TO UNDERSTAND.

"IT WAS LIKE A *SUPER-POWER.*

"IT TERRIFIED THE OTHERS SO BADLY THAT THEY TRIED TO *KILL* THESE *MUTANTS.*

"BUT THE CAPACITY FOR *SPEECH* LET THEM *FIGHT BACK* MORE EFFECTIVELY, AND THEY *SURVIVED.*

"CAN YOU IMAGINE WHAT THE WORLD WOULD LOOK LIKE *NOW* IF THEY HAD SUCCEEDED IN WIPING OUT THIS MUTATION?"

THAT'S THE IRONY OF OUR SITUATION. THE *HUMAN RACE* IS JUST WHAT THE *MUTANTS* WHO *WON* DECIDED TO *CALL* THEMSELVES...WHILE THEY FIGHT THE *NEXT* BUNCH OF MUTANTS.

WE'RE LATE... WE NEED TO KEEP MOVING.

LATER, RAOUL.

IN A WHILE, CROCODILE.

SHE'S IN HER OFFICE. GO ON IN.

ARE YOU SURE THERE'S ROOM FOR--

--US?

HELLO.

HEY.

YOU *DO* KNOW THAT AT THIS MOMENT, IT'S *RAINING* OUTSIDE, RIGHT?

OUTSIDE, YES. BUT THIS IS THE *OUTSIDE*, *OUTSIDE* OF THE *OUTSIDE*.

RIGHT. OBVIOUSLY.

COME SIT.

THIS IS THE LIST OF THE FINAL PEOPLE I NEED YOU TO BRING HERE SO WE CAN MOVE ON TO THE NEXT PHASE.

THE LIST OF THE LAST OR THE LAST OF THE LIST?

HRM.

HEY, YOU STARTED THIS WITH THE WHOLE "OUTSIDE OF THE OUTSIDE" BUSINESS.

ONE IS IN CHILE, ANOTHER IN LONDON. GIVEN THAT THEY ARE ALREADY BEING *HUNTED*, I SUGGEST YOU START AT THE FARTHEST POINT AND WORK YOUR WAY IN, IN CASE THEY TRY TO BLOCK THE WAY.

THAT'S ONLY TWO. YOU SAID THERE WERE *FOUR*.

THE *LAST*, WHO IS THE MOST POWERFUL, AND HIS *COMPANION* ARE BEYOND WHERE I CAN SEE THEM.

I DIDN'T THINK ANYONE COULD HIDE FROM YOU.

THEY CAN'T. THAT'S WHY WE NEED THIS ONE. IF HE CAN HIDE FROM *ME*, HE CAN HIDE FROM MY *BROTHER*.

AND THAT COULD SAVE NOT JUST HIS LIFE, BUT MANY OTHERS.

WHAT I DON'T UNDERSTAND, IS IF YOUR BROTHER IS *DEATH*--

THAT IS ONLY *PART* OF WHAT HE IS.

--THEN WHY DOESN'T HE JUST KILL THE OTHERS I'M AFTER ON HIS OWN?

THERE ARE *RULES*, *LIMITS* THAT WERE EMBEDDED IN HIS VERY *BEING* AT THE MOMENT OF HIS CREATION. THEY ARE AS MUCH A PART OF HIM AS YOUR CELLS ARE A PART OF YOU. HE CANNOT *DEFEAT* THEM WITHOUT *DESTROYING* HIMSELF.

"ALL HUMANS HAVE A SET NUMBER OF POSSIBLE FINAL *MOMENTS.* EDDIES AND CURRENTS OF *MORTALITY.*

"HE CANNOT INTERFERE WITH THEM DIRECTLY.

"BUT AT THE CRITICAL MOMENT, HE CAN *NUDGE* ONE HUMAN OUT OF THE PATH OF THAT INEVITABLE MOMENT--

"--AND IN SO DOING, NUDGE *ANOTHER* HUMAN *INTO* THE PATH OF THAT MOMENT."

SCREEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEECH

BUT YOU TOLD ME HE DESTROYED EVERYONE ELSE WHO LIVED IN THE *PALE CITY.* WHY COULD HE DO *THAT?*

BECAUSE THE THOUGHT NEVER OCCURRED TO US TO CREATE PROTECTIONS AGAINST ONE OF OUR *OWN.*

"AND THE PRICE WAS CATASTROPHIC.

"SO RIDE *WELL* AND RIDE *TRUE,* STEVEN. FOR THE FUTURE ITSELF IS COUNTING ON YOU.

"YOU WILL FIND THE FIRST ONE AT A SMALL VILLAGE NEAR THE *VALLE DE LA LUNA.*

"THE VALLEY OF THE MOON."

Once you arrive at the village, you will find Carlos Alvarez Garcia in the central plaza.

YEAH, BUT HOW WILL I KNOW IT'S HIM?

Once you arrive at the village, you will find Carlos Alvarez Garcia in the central plaza.

Once you arrive at the village, you will find Carlos Alvarez Garcia in the central plaza..

Part of him will be wearing a hat

"PART OF HIM WILL BE WEARING A HAT."

PART OF HIM WILL BE WEARING A HAT.

FINE.

THEN *ALL* OF ME WILL BE WEARING *THIS.*

CARLOS?

CARLOS ALVAREZ GARCIA?

OVER HERE.

TOOK YOU LONG ENOUGH. DID *SHE* COME WITH YOU?

NO. SHE'S BUSY BACK IN NEW YORK. AND I DIDN'T COME FOR *YOU*, I CAME FOR THE MAN IN THE *HAT*.

YEAH? TAKE A CLOSER LOOK.

IT LOOKED A LOT BETTER YESTERDAY. ONCE THE SKIN COMES LOOSE, IT TENDS TO WRINKLE AND PUCKER UP IN THE HOT SUN.

IT'S WHAT I DO. I CAN SHED MY SKIN, SECRETE TOXINS FROM IT, I'M WAY STRONG, CAN REGENERATE BODY PARTS AND I'M A BEAST AT TABLE TENNIS, AND THERE'S A FEW OTHER THINGS I CAN DO.

LIKE THIS.

COOL, *HUH?* I CAN CONTROL IT AS THE REST OF MY BODY AS LONG AS IT'S MORE OR LESS IN ONE PIECE.

THAT'S HOW I EARNED THE NICKNAME... WAIT FOR IT...

...***SKINZ.*** NOT VERY ORIGINAL, BUT IT GETS THE JOB DONE.

AND SO DO I.

THEN WHAT DO YOU NEED ***ME*** FOR?

AND WHERE IS EVERYBODY?

TWO QUESTIONS. SAME ANSWER.

THE ***PEOPLE*** LEFT WHEN THE ***SOLDIERS*** SHOWED UP TO KEEP ME HERE.

"THE PRESIDENT'S SON WAS ***SICK*** AND SOON TO ***DIE,*** YOU SEE. BUT THEN HE WHO SHALL NOT BE NAMED AGREED TO ***POSTPONE*** THAT FATE IN RETURN FOR--

"--CERTAIN ***FAVORS.***"

AT FIRST, THE SOLDIERS INTENDED TO SIMPLY ***KILL*** ME, BUT THEN THEY REALIZED THAT IT WAS BETTER TO KEEP ME ALIVE AS ***BAIT*** FOR WHOEVER ***SHE*** MIGHT SEND. SO THEY TOOK UP POSITION NEAR HERE--

"--WHERE THEY COULD WAIT AND ***WATCH.*** THEY SAW YOU THE MOMENT YOU APPROACHED THE VALLEY OF THE MOON. I SUSPECT SOME OF THEM ARE ALREADY HERE."

LIKE ALL MEN OF WAR AND GUNS AND LITTLE INTELLIGENCE, THEY BELIEVE THAT WE WILL NEVER LEAVE HERE ***ALIVE,*** THAT THEIR ***NUMBERS*** AND THEIR ***WEAPONS*** WILL OVERWHELM JUST THE TWO OF US.

IT'S NOT JUST THE TWO OF US.

I HAVE A PENGUIN.

PRAISE GOD.

"AND NOW OUR NEXT PERFORMANCE--

"--A SONG OF PEACE AND TRANQUILITY BY *DELILAH SQUARED!*"

OH, WHAT DID I EVER DO TO YOU? WHAT DID I DO TO MAKE YOU BLUE?

"YOU SAY IT'S BECAUSE I'M SO DIFFERENT, YOU SAY I'M NOT WHO I SHOULD BE.

"YOU SAY IT'S BECAUSE I'M NOT NORMAL. YOU SAID IT REAL CLEAR AND REAL LOUDLY."

SO ALLOW ME NOW TO REBUT.

NORMAL

?

NORMAL

YOU HATE WHAT YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND! YOU HATE WHAT YOU CAN'T COMMAND!

"YOU HATE MY FRIENDS, YOU SAY THEY'RE WEIRD--

♩"BUT IF LIKE ATTRACTS LIKE--♫

"--THEN WHAT AM I?♩

"WHO AM I AND WHY AM I AND EVEN IF I KNEW--"♫

--I KNOW YOU KNOW I KNOW IT WOULDN'T MATTER.♫

"I'M SMOTHERED BY YOUR WORDS, DROWNED BENEATH YOUR INTENTIONS.

"BUT STILL I INSIST I PERSIST I EXIST!"

BECAUSE THIS IS THE BEST I CAN HOPE FOR, THE BEST I CAN EVER EXPECT, FROM MY PRISTINE, PERFECT, POISED--

NORMAL

?

NORMAL

--NUCLEAR FAMILY.

BOOM.

"JUST KIDDING, MOM.

"MISS YOU.

"LOVE YOU TOO.

"OKAY. TAKE CARE. BEST TO DAD.

"BUH-BYE."

CLICK!

AND--

--DISCONNECT.

CLAP!

CLAP!

CLAP!

CLAP!

CLAP!

CLAP!

CLAP!

CLAP!

CLAP!

HOW'S THE HAND?

GOOD AS NEW. TECHNICALLY, ***NEW***-NEW.

GOOD.

GOT A QUESTION FOR YOU.

YOU SAID THE MERCENARIES WERE POSITIONED WHERE THEY COULD KEEP AN EYE ON THE TOWN... BUT I ***KNOW*** WHEN I'M BEING WATCHED.

AND I DIDN'T SEE OR FEEL ANYBODY OR ANYTHING OUT THERE WHILE I WAS DRIVING INTO TOWN.

SO HOW'D THEY KNOW?

MAYBE YOU MISSED SOMETHING?

NOT WHAT I DO.

THEN I HAVE NO ANSWERS.

YOU KNOW HOW TO RIDE ONE OF THESE?

BARELY. BUT IT'S ME. IF PART OF ME FALLS OFF, WAIT A FEW MINUTES AND IT'S BACK AGAIN.

"SO REALLY, WHAT'S THE WORST THAT CAN HAPPEN?"

SO, HOW LONG UNTIL THE BOAT GETS HERE?

ABOUT AN HOUR. THEN IT'S A PRIVATE PLANE TO LONDON. SO THERE'S A LITTLE TIME TO KILL.

TWO HOURS IS KILLING TIME. ONE HOUR IS JUST WOUNDING IT.

SO WHEN DID YOU KNOW YOU WERE...I MEAN, WHEN DID YOU KNOW YOU HAD POWERS?

IT'S OKAY TO SAY "MUTANT" TO MY FACE. I'VE BEEN CALLED WORSE.

I WAS FOUR.

"I WAS ABOUT TO BE ATTACKED BY A PIT BULL...I INSTINCTIVELY RAISED MY HANDS TO PROTECT MYSELF AND THE ***TOXINS*** SHOT OUT FULL FORCE, KILLING IT INSTANTLY.

"MY MOTHER HEARD ME SCREAM AND CAME RUNNING TO FIND OUT WHAT HAD HAPPENED, IF I WAS OKAY.

"SHE PICKED ME UP... BUT WHAT NEITHER OF US KNEW WAS THAT THE TOXINS WERE STILL ON MY HANDS."

SHE WAS DEAD BEFORE SHE HIT THE GROUND.

I'M GOING TO GET A COFFEE. YOU WANT ONE?

YEAH. TAKE YOUR TIME.

I KNOW YOU'RE IN THERE. I KNOW YOU WERE ***WAITING*** FOR ME. AND I KNOW YOU'RE ***WATCHING***.

THAT'S WHY YOU CHOSE TO POSSESS SOMETHING THAT WOULD BE SO OUT OF PLACE, SO IN DANGER, THAT I WOULDN'T BE PAYING ATTENTION, WOULDN'T SUSPECT ANYTHING.

YOU WANT TO SPY ON US, YOU WANT TO SEE HOW WE'RE GOING TO ***BEAT*** YOU, FINE... I UNDERSTAND THE RULES OF THE GAME. BUT FOR THE LOVE OF ALL THAT'S DECENT--

--LET GO OF THE PENGUIN. SERIOUSLY.

CAPTAIN AMERICA

Nº10 | REVELATIONS FROM THE WEST END

IT'S BEEN FIVE DAYS SINCE CARLOS ALVAREZ GARCIA AND I FOUGHT OUR WAY OUT OF CHILE TO ROUND UP MUTANTS LYRA FEELS ARE ESSENTIAL TO THE NEXT PHASE OF... WHATEVER SHE HAS PLANNED.

NEXT UP: LONDON.

SAMUEL JOHNSON WROTE, "WHEN A MAN IS TIRED OF LONDON, HE'S TIRED OF LIFE."

PAUL THEROUX COUNTERED, "A PERSON WHO IS TIRED OF LONDON IS NOT NECESSARILY TIRED OF LIFE; IT MIGHT BE THAT HE JUST CAN'T FIND A PARKING PLACE."

AS USUAL, OSCAR WILDE GETS THE LAST WORD: "I LOVE LONDON SOCIETY! I THINK IT HAS IMMENSELY IMPROVED.

"IT IS ENTIRELY COMPOSED NOW OF BEAUTIFUL IDIOTS AND BRILLIANT LUNATICS. JUST WHAT SOCIETY SHOULD BE."

AND AS CARLOS AND I MAKE OUR WAY THROUGH THE WEST END, WITH ONLY A VAGUE IDEA OF WHERE WE'RE GOING, I WONDER--

--WHICH OF THOSE ARE WE?

I JUST DON'T THINK IT WAS FUNNY.

OF COURSE YOU DON'T. BECAUSE YOU DON'T HAVE A SENSE OF HUMOR.

I HAVE A GREAT SENSE OF HUMOR.

GIVE ME YOUR PHONE SO I CAN START POLLING YOUR FRIENDS.

YOU LEFT THE *LIVING EPIDERMIS* OF YOUR *RIGHT HAND* IN THE *RESTAURANT*--

--SIGNING THE CHECK OVER AND OVER AND OVER--

--WITH A PEN *THAT WASN'T ACTUALLY THERE.*

MY BEST WORK. I'M AN ARTIST.

TWO COFFEES, PLEASE.

YOU DIDN'T EVEN STAY TO SEE THE *REACTION*--

SOME THINGS ARE BETTER LEFT TO THE IMAGINATION.

OPEN

SIGH

SO ARE YOU REALLY AN ARTIST?

I *WAS*, YES, BEFORE I WENT ON THE RUN, LIKE NEARLY EVERY *OTHER* MUTANT OUT THERE. PAINTINGS, SCULPTURES...TEMPLATES FOR MENUS...

PING!

THAT'S WHY I WAS TRYING TO MAKE MY WAY TO THE *FRONT DOOR* WHEN DEATH'S *ALLIES* CUT ME OFF.

"I HEARD THAT HIS SISTER LYRA HAD CREATED A *HAVEN* FOR ARTISTS OF EVERY KIND, HUMAN AND MUTANT.

"APPARENTLY THE WHOLE *WORLD* HAS TILTED ON ITS AXIS, AND EVERYTHING LOOSE HAS BEGUN ROLLING INTO THE *FRONT DOOR* IN PREPARATION FOR--"

PREPARATION FOR WHAT?

FOR A SECOND THERE, I THOUGHT YOU COULD.

WHO CAN SAY?

ME? NO. I'M JUST PASSING THROUGH.

PING!

SO HOW ARE WE SUPPOSED TO FIND THIS PLACE IF WE DON'T KNOW WHERE WE'RE GOING?

PING!

LYRA SAID THEY'D FIND US. AND MAYBE THAT'S THEM LOOKING FOR US.

JUST A SEC.

EXCUSE ME, IS THAT FOR ME?
IS YOUR NAME STEVE?
YES.
THEN IT'S FOR YOU.
YEP?
TWO BLOCKS UP. MAKE A RIGHT. SECOND BUILDING FROM THE END. DOUBLE DOORS.
CLICK!
WHO WAS IT?
SHE DIDN'T SAY. NICE TRICK THOUGH. PINGING US THROUGH EVERY-ONE ELSE'S CELL PHONES.
IF SHE CAN DO ALL *THAT*, WHY DIDN'T SHE JUST CALL YOU DIRECTLY?
PING!
ALL RIGHTY, THEN.
DIDN'T FEEL LIKE IT
THIS WAY.
PHONE

"LADY AND THE TIGER," ANYONE?

WELL, IT'S PRETTY OBVIOUS, ISN'T IT? IF *THAT* DOOR SAYS USE THE *OTHER* DOOR, THEN THAT'S THE WAY IN.

USE THE OTHER DOOR

ANOTHER DOOR

144 052 7436

HANG ON.

FROM WHAT MY GRADE SCHOOL TEACHER TAUGHT ME IN GRAMMAR CLASS, THE PROGRESSION GOES FROM THE *DOOR*, TO THE *OTHER DOOR*, TO *ANOTHER DOOR*, THEN *YET ANOTHER DOOR*.

SO THE *OTHER DOOR* IS *BETWEEN THE DOOR* AND *ANOTHER DOOR*.

WHOEVER DESIGNED THIS WANTED PEOPLE TO MISS THE *POINT* AND GO FOR ONE OF THE *OBVIOUS* DOORS, INSTEAD OF LOOKING IN THE MIDDLE FOR--

CLICK

--THIS.

NOT BAD. BUT YOU *KNOW* THAT ONLY WORKS IN *ENGLISH*, RIGHT? IN SPANISH, NOT SO MUCH.

DON'T WORRY--

--WHAT'S WRITTEN ON THE DOORS *CHANGES* DEPENDING ON WHO'S TRYING TO OPEN IT.

COME ON IN.

NAME'S RAYMOND. THIS WAY.

SO WHAT WOULD'VE HAPPENED IF WE'D GONE THROUGH THE WRONG DOOR?

YOU'D'VE FOUND YOURSELF BACK OUTSIDE AGAIN WITH NO MEMORY OF BEING INSIDE. TRY AGAIN? SAME THING. HAD ONE IDIOT TRY IT ALL DAY. ENDED UP WITH THE BIGGEST HEADACHE IN HISTORY.

THAT A LITTLE TRICK OF YOURS, RAYMOND?

ME? *NAH.* THAT'S THE ***SEER.*** SHE DOESN'T ***RUN*** THIS PLACE, NOT LIKE ***LYRA,*** BUT SHE'S ALWAYS 'ERE, WATCHIN' OUT FOR EVERYONE.

MAKIN' OUR OWN LITTLE VERSION OF THE ***FRONT DOOR*** WAS 'ER IDEA, Y'KNOW. NEVER BEEN, MYSELF.

FROM THE ACCENT, I'M GUESSING LIVERPOOL?

YUP. CAME TO LONDON FIVE YEARS AGO, AND THIS IS AS FAR AS I CARE TO GO.

MIND YOUR STEP, MIND WHO YOU BUMP INTO AND, FOR GOD'S SAKE, MIND YOUR WALLET.

"FOUND 'EM AT THE DOOR, JUST ***LIKE*** YOU SAID, JUST ***WHEN*** YOU SAID."

SO IF YOU'RE A *SEER*, THEN YOU'RE, LIKE, WHAT, SOME KIND OF PROPHET?

SOME KIND, YEAH.

WE'VE COME TO BRING YOU TO--

I *KNOW* WHY YOU'RE HERE... WOULDN'T BE MUCH OF A SEER IF I *DIDN'T*, NOW WOULD I?

I WAS UNDER THE IMPRESSION YOU *WANTED* TO COME WITH US.

AND THE ANSWER'S NO. PISS OFF.

YOU WERE MISINFORMED.

RAYMOND, LUV, GIVE US A MINUTE.

I KNOW LYRA SENT YOU...AND I KNOW SHE'S TRYING TO HELP, BUT I'M SAFER RIGHT WHERE I AM. SO UNLESS YOU'RE GOING TO TRY TO *FORCE* THE ISSUE--

NOT A CHANCE.

--THEN YOU MAY AS WELL TURN AROUND AND HEAD FOR THE NEXT PERSON ON YOUR LIST.

YOU HAVE TO UNDERSTAND... A PERSON WHO CAN DO WHAT I CAN DO IS WORTH *BILLIONS* TO SOME PEOPLE. WHICH IS WHY I'VE BEEN HUNTED FOR MORE YEARS THAN I EVEN WANT TO *THINK* ABOUT.

EVERY TIME I *RUN*, EVERY TIME I PUT MY *HEAD* OUT THERE, THE *HUNTERS* COME AFTER ME TO COLLECT THE BOUNTY.

SO I DON'T RUN ANYMORE. I CREATED A NICE LITTLE ECOSYSTEM FOR MYSELF RIGHT HERE. RAYMOND AND THE REST LOOK AFTER ME, NOBODY KNOWS MY REAL NAME AND, FOR THE LAST YEAR, I'VE BEEN *SAFE*.

DON'T YOU MISS THE REST OF THE WORLD?

HAVE YOU *SEEN* IT? NO. I HAVE A *ROOM*, EVERY STREAMING *NETWORK* RAYMOND AND HIS PALS CAN HACK, NONSTOP *MUSIC*, PEOPLE I TRUST NOT TO *HURT* ME OR SELL ME *OUT*--

--I'M JUST FINE.

NORMIES WANT TO *BUY, SELL* AND MAKE ME A *PET*. OTHER *MUTANTS* WANT ME TO JOIN A *WAR* NOBODY'S EVER GOING TO *WIN*... THANKS, BUT NO THANKS. I'M NOT ENGAGING.

I'M NEUTRAL.

I'M SWITZERLAND.

SO WHAT *IS* YOUR POWER, ANYWAY?

I'M SENSITIVE TO ALL KINDS OF ENERGY FREQUENCIES, ESPECIALLY ELECTRONICS.

AS WE SAW WITH THE PHONES.

YES.

BUT WHAT DOES THAT HAVE TO DO WITH SEEING THE FUTURE?

REALITY OPERATES THROUGH THE INTERSECTION OF ***POSSIBILITIES*** AND ***PROBABILITIES.*** I CAN SEE THE WHOLE WORLD AT A GLANCE, EVERYTHING THAT'S GOING ON EVERYWHERE, AND INTUITIVELY KNOW WHICH POSSIBILITY IS ABOUT TO BECOME A PROBABILITY AND ***HAPPEN.***

FOR INSTANCE--

--DO YOU KNOW HOW MANY BILLIONS OF ***VIDEO CAMERAS*** THERE ARE IN THE WORLD, CONSTANTLY SENDING OUT INFORMATION? HOME AND CORPORATE SECURITY CAMERAS, TRAFFIC CAMERAS, NEWS CAMERAS? DO YOU KNOW WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE ABLE TO ***SEE THROUGH ALL OF THEM,*** AT THE SAME TIME?

NO.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO?

I DUNNO, STEVE, I--

YES.

HANG ON TO YOUR SOCKS.

AAAGH!!

TWO SECONDS. NOT BAD. THE LAST PERSON I LET IN ONLY LASTED A FRACTION OF A SECOND AND SPENT THE NEXT TWO MONTHS IN A PADDED WHITE ROOM... SCREAMING...

STEVE, ARE YOU OKAY?

I SAW... I SAW...

...I SAW *EVERYTHING*, AND FOR JUST A MOMENT, I... *UNDERSTOOD*...EVERYTHING. BUT I CAN'T SEEM TO BRING IT BACK--

DON'T GO TOO FAR DOWN THAT ROAD, FRIEND... THAT WAY MADNESS LIES...

AND I SAW SOMETHING ELSE--

I SEE IT TOO... I WAS SO BUSY WITH YOU THAT I WASN'T PAYING ATTENTION, LET MY GUARD DOWN--

SEE WHAT?

HUNTERS.

HELICOPTERS.

ON THE ROOF.

RIGHT NOW.

SMOKE!

HUNDRED THOUSAND POUND BONUS TO THE FIRST GUY WHO FINDS THE TECH WITCH! ANYONE BETWEEN US AND HER IS TO BE CONSIDERED *COLLATERAL DAMAGE.*

MOVE OUT!

DRIVE 'EM OUT! WE DON'T WANT WITNESSES!

COME ON...WE NEED TO GET YOU OUT OF HARM'S WAY.

BUT WHAT ABOUT--?

DON'T WORRY--

"--HE CAN TAKE CARE OF HIMSELF."

SHUNK

YOU SHOULD LEAVE NOW.

ALL OF YOU.

WHILE YOU STILL CAN.

CUT HIM DOWN!

AAAAAGH!

MY KNEE! SONOFA--

BULLETS WORK BEST AT A DISTANCE.

LET'S SEE HOW BRAVE YOU ARE UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL.

ANY LAST WORDS BEFORE YOU WAKE UP IN A HOSPITAL?

YEAH... FIVE OF 'EM.

TEAMS B AND C, GO!

KRASH

GOT YOU IN A BIT OF A CROSSFIRE, CAP. WHICHEVER WAY YOU GO, THE OTHER SIDE WILL TAKE YOU DOWN.

GENTLEMEN--

--WE ARE ABOUT TO MAKE HISTORY.

NO--

WHY ARE YOU STOP--

USE THE OTHER DOOR

ANOTHER DOOR

NO TIME... NEED TO CONCENTRATE...

I CAN ONLY DO THIS FOR A *SECOND*...

"...BUT THAT MAY BE ENOUGH."

OPEN FIRE IN THREE, TWO--

--ONNNNNNNNNN--

"BRAINS ARE JUST ONE MORE FORM OF ELECTRICAL PERCEPTION.

"I CAN SEE THROUGH THEM--

"--AND, JUST FOR A SECOND, SLOW DOWN THE FEED.

"THEN I HIT *RESTART.*"

--NNNNNE... FIRE.

BRRRRRRPPPP!

BRRRRRRPPPP!

BRRRRRRPPPP!

BLAM BLAM BLAM!

"YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE DONE IT."

I HAD TO SAVE YOU--

I HAD A *PLAN*--

NOT FROM WHAT I SAW. I HAD A ***SECOND*** TO REACT. I DID WHAT I DID, AND I REGRET NOTHING--

--EXCEPT--

--WHAT THIS DID TO THE ***OTHERS.*** I WANTED THIS TO BE A ***REFUGE,*** A PLACE OF ***SAFETY,*** LIKE THE ***FRONT DOOR,*** BUT WE DON'T HAVE THE KIND OF ***PROTECTION*** THAT ***LYRA*** OFFERS.

I THOUGHT WE COULD MAKE A STAND ALONE.

I WAS WRONG. THAT WAS ***EGO*** TALKING.

THE HUNTERS WANTED ***ME,*** BUT IT'S THE OTHERS WHO WILL PAY THE PRICE IN TRAUMAS THAT WILL LAST A ***LIFETIME.***

I DON'T BELONG HERE. MAYBE I DON'T BELONG ***ANYWHERE.***

EITHER WAY, I SHOULDN'T BE HERE ANYMORE...SHOULDN'T RISK ANYONE ELSE FOR MY OWN SAFETY.

I'LL GO WITH YOU.

I'LL GO.

PLANE SHOULD BE HERE ANY TIME.
WHERE ARE WE GOING?
CHICAGO. LAST STOP BEFORE NEW YORK AND THE FRONT DOOR.
IT'S A LONG TRIP, SO IT'D BE GREAT IF THERE WAS A NAME I COULD CALL YOU OTHER THAN SEER. REMINDS ME TOO MUCH OF THE CATALOG.
WHAT CATALOG?
...DOESN'T MATTER.
BECCA.
IT'S BEEN SO LONG SINCE I'VE SAID THAT NAME THAT I DON'T EVEN RECOGNIZE IT.
GOOD TO MEET YOU, BECCA.
AND WE WON'T SPREAD THAT NAME AROUND.
THANK YOU.
IF THERE'S STILL A FEW MINUTES BEFORE THE PLANE GETS HERE, I'M GOING TO HIT THE BATHROOM.
WE'LL BE HERE.

I'M IN.

SAYING I DIDN'T *WANT* TO GO, THEN BEING PUSHED INTO IT BY OUTSIDE FORCES, MADE JOINING UP SEEM MORE *SINCERE*, SO THEY WOULDN'T LOOK ANY *DEEPER* INTO MY PAST.

YOUR PEOPLE DID THEIR JOBS, EXCEPT FOR THE DYING PART, WHICH I'M GUESSING YOU DIDN'T MENTION TO THEM.

IF I DO THIS, I WANT YOUR *WORD* THAT YOU'LL GIVE ME WHAT I NEED.

AND THAT *NONE* OF THIS WILL *EVER* BE TRACED BACK TO ME.

IT WILL BE DONE.

OKAY, THEN... OKAY.

WELL, HERE WE GO.

CAPTAIN AMERICA

TRYING TO COME HOME | №11

SO, HOW MUCH LONGER DO YOU THINK IT'LL BE, STEVE?

Chicago, Illinois.

A FEW MORE DAYS.

YOU SAID THAT THE LAST TIME.

NO, SHARON. I SAID "A FEW DAYS." THIS WAS "A FEW *MORE* DAYS." TOTALLY DIFFERENT SENTENCE.

YOU SHOULD'VE BEEN A LAWYER.

THAT'S A TERRIBLE THING TO TELL SOMEONE YOU **SAY** YOU LOVE.

FIRST RULE OF RELATIONSHIPS AND COMBAT: ALWAYS KNOW WHERE TO STICK THE KNIFE.

FAIR.

THESE PEOPLE WERE SUPPOSED TO REACH OUT TO YOU. MAYBE THEY GOT COLD FEET?

MAYBE. COULDN'T BLAME THEM IF THEY DID.

DO YOU EVEN KNOW WHO THIS GUY IS?

NOT EXACTLY.

"SO HOW AM I SUPPOSED TO *FIND* HIM IF I DON'T KNOW WHO HE *IS*, OR BE SURE IF I'VE GOT THE *RIGHT* GUY EVEN IF I *DO* MANAGE TO FIND SOMEBODY?"

AND HOW COME *YOU* DON'T KNOW?

THERE'S SOMETHING *BLOCKING* ME FROM SEEING HIM DIRECTLY.

I THOUGHT YOU COULD SEE *EVERYONE.*

I CAN.

SO HOW DO YOU KNOW HE'S *POWERFUL?*

GO BACK FOUR SENTENCES AND YOU'LL FIGURE IT OUT.

BEING *POWERFUL* IS ONLY PART OF IT. SOMETIMES ORDINARY PEOPLE ARE PLUCKED OUT OF OBSCURITY AND THRUST INTO THE RIVER OF HISTORY BECAUSE THEY ARE IN THE RIGHT *PLACE* AT THE RIGHT *TIME.*

OR, CONVERSELY, AT THE RIGHT PLACE AT THE MOST HORRIFICALLY AND TRAGICALLY *WRONG* TIME IMAGINABLE.

LAWRENCE OF ARABIA. GANDHI. ROSA PARKS. LECH WAŁESA. MALALA YOUSAFZAI. ROBESPIERRE. LINCOLN. ONCE ORDINARY PEOPLE WHO CHANGED THE WORLD.

AND THE ONE WE SEEK IS *FAR* FROM ORDINARY. HE WILL CHANGE *EVERYTHING.*

HE, AND HIS *DEATH--*

--BUT IF, AND *ONLY* IF, IT COMES AT THE RIGHT MOMENT.

WAIT A SECOND--

--AM I BRINGING THIS GUY OUT OF HIDING JUST SO HE CAN *DIE?*

WE ALL DIE, STEVEN. I WANT TO GIVE HIM *LIFE* AND A CHANCE TO MAKE A *DIFFERENCE.*

IS THAT REALLY SO DIFFERENT FROM--

"--THE DEAL THAT WAS OFFERED TO YOU?"

STEVE ROGERS? ABRAHAM ERSKINE, PLEASED TO MEET YOU.

ALL I CAN DO IS PUT THE OFFER IN FRONT OF HIM, AS WAS DONE WITH YOU. THE REST IS UP TO HIM.

AND FOR WHAT IT IS WORTH, AS ONE WHO HAS MADE JUST THAT DECISION HIMSELF, I BELIEVE YOU WILL RECOGNIZE ONE ANOTHER WHEN YOU MEET.

I'LL BE HONEST-- IT'S KIND OF FRUSTRATING, AND--

BRRRRRRING

GOTTA GO, SWEETIE. THIS MIGHT BE THEM.

GOOD LUCK, STEVE.

ROGERS.

ONE HOUR. WRITE DOWN THIS ADDRESS...

YOU *SURE* THIS IS THE WAY?

IT'S WHAT I WAS TOLD, CARLOS.

YEAH, OKAY, BUT REMEMBER, YOU TALKED TO A PENGUIN.

HE *WHAT?*

LONG STORY, BECCA.

WELP, THIS IS IT.

ARE YOU KIDDING?

NOT REALLY KNOWN FOR THAT.

ALL RIGHT, LET'S SEE WHERE THIS GOES.

JUST FOR THE RECORD, IF A BALROG SHOWS UP, I'M LEAVING.

COPY THAT. I--

WHAT THE HELL...?

MORE PEOPLE.

MORE ALWAYS.

NO CUTTING IN LINE!

I'M NEXT, I'VE BEEN WAITING ALL WEEK!

ALWAYS MORE.

MORE.

TAKE A NUMBER, PLEASE--

WE HAVE AN APPOINTMENT.

AN APP--

OH!

SORRY! RIGHT! OF COURSE!

THIS WAY!

SO, WHO ARE YOU AND WHERE DO YOU FIT IN ALL THIS?

I'M JULIE...JULIE BENNETT. I'VE BEEN HERE FOR ABOUT A YEAR NOW. I ORGANIZE THINGS, RUN THE LINES.

YOU *LIKE* WORKING DOWN HERE?

OH, SURE! THE WORK IS IMPORTANT.

WHAT ARE ALL THESE PEOPLE ***HERE*** FOR?

DEPENDS. SOME COME TO HEAR THEIR ***FUTURE***, OTHERS TO UNDERSTAND THEIR ***PAST***, A FEW TO ***HEAL***.

WHOEVER THIS GUY IS, IT SOUNDS LIKE HIS ***POWER*** IS BEING A STREET-CORNER CON MAN.

MMMM.

I UNDERSTAND THAT PART OF YOUR ***POWER*** IS BEING ABLE TO PEEL OFF YOUR ***SKIN*** AND USE IT.

THAT'S RIGHT.

OKAY...JUST CHECKING.

BECAUSE I WENT TO THE DERMATOLOGIST A WHILE BACK AND GOT A PEEL, WHICH IS REALLY THE SAME THING--

NO, IT'S NOT--

ACTUALLY, IT KINDA IS.

IT'S NOTHING PERSONAL--I JUST THINK...IN THE GRAND SCHEME OF THINGS, IT'S REALLY NOT THAT MUCH OF A POWER.

I THINK IT IS.

OH, SURE, I GET THAT. WE HOLD ON TO WHATEVER WE HAVE, RIGHT?

BUT SKINZ ISN'T REALLY A VERY DESCRIPTIVE SUPER-NAME, IS IT? FOR PEELING YOUR SKIN OFF, WOULDN'T, I DON'T KNOW--

--CAPTAIN ***SUNBURN*** BE BETTER? IT'S CERTAINLY MORE VISUAL.

NO.

YOU SURE?

YES.

I'LL GO AHEAD AND UNLOCK THE DOOR.

I LIKE HER SENSE OF HUMOR.

YOU WOULD.

YOU CAN STAND AT THIS END OF THE ROOM. THEY'LL BE HERE IN A SEC.

WAIT, I--

SLAM!

...THEY?

FWOOM!

I AM THE *GUARDIAN*, SISTER TO *MALIK*.

I GIVE YOU FAIR WARNING. AND I GIVE IT ONLY *ONCE*.

IF YOU ATTEMPT TO *HARM* HIM, I WILL KILL *YOU*, YOUR *FRIENDS*, YOUR *FAMILIES* AND EVERYONE YOU HAVE EVER *CARED* ABOUT.

IF YOU *INSULT* HIM OR *DERIDE* HIM TO HIS FACE, YOU GET OFF *EASY*.

I WILL SIMPLY KILL THE THREE OF YOU.

WELL... YOU CAN *TRY*.

CARLOS...

MALIK SAYS THAT YOU CAN *REGENERATE*, A POWER YOU *INHERITED* FROM YOUR *MOTHER*.

HOW CAN YOU KNOW--

AN ANCESTOR OF MINE *THREE HUNDRED YEARS* AGO COULD CONTROL THE *POWER COSMIC*. OVER *SIX GENERATIONS*, THAT POWER HAS REDUCED TO JUST A FRACTION OF WHAT IT ONCE WAS.

BUT DO YOU KNOW, DO YOU *UNDERSTAND*, WHAT EVEN A *FRACTION* OF THE *POWER COSMIC* CAN DO--

--TO YOU?

ZZZZAAAAAPPP!

WHEN EVERY *CELL* IN YOUR *BODY* HAS BEEN REDUCED TO A SMOKING CINDER--

--WHAT EXACTLY WILL YOU USE TO *REGENERATE*--

--INSECT?

THAT'S ENOUGH.

WE DIDN'T COME HERE FOR A FIGHT. IF YOU WANT CARLOS, YOU'LL HAVE TO COME THROUGH ME FIRST.

AND JUST FOR THE RECORD: NO ONE HAS EVER MANAGED TO DO THAT.

LET ME SHOW YOU WHY.

IT'S ALL RIGHT, B.

LET THEM THROUGH. THIS WAS ALWAYS GOING TO HAPPEN.

AS YOU WISH, MALIK.

MY APOLOGIES. MY SISTER--SISTER BY *CHOICE*, NOT BY BLOOD--IS VERY PROTECTIVE OF ME.

WITH PLENTY OF REASON.

BUT IF WE ARE TO SURVIVE THE DARKNESS THAT IS COMING, WE CANNOT FIGHT AMONG OURSELVES. THERE MUST BE PEACE--

--EVEN IF ONLY FOR A LITTLE WHILE.

LYRA SAID I WOULD KNOW HIM WHEN I SAW HIM. SHE WAS RIGHT.

STANDING THIS CLOSE FEELS LIKE BEING NEAR A POWER PLANT...I CAN FEEL THE HAIRS ON MY ARMS STANDING UP.

SO, WHAT IS IT EXACTLY THAT YOU *DO*? WHAT'S YOUR *POWER*?

CARLOS--

IT'S ALL RIGHT...A FAIR QUESTION.

I WALK IN THE DREAMS OF OTHERS, SEEING WHAT THEY SEE, FEELING WHAT THEY FEEL.

I CAN TAKE THE PAIN OF OTHERS INTO MYSELF, FREEING THEM FROM THAT AGONY--

AT GREAT COST TO YOURSELF. I'VE SEEN WHAT IT DOES TO YOU--

IT IS MY PURPOSE AND MY JOY. THE PAIN IS NOT A BURDEN.

THERE'S ALSO AN ENERGY ABOUT HIM...IF YOU LIE TO HIM WITH EVIL INTENT, YOU DIE.

NOT ENTIRELY CORRECT--

OKAYOKAYOKAY--

--THERE'S A SLIDING SCALE, ALL RIGHT? THE BIGGER THE LIE, THE MORE EVIL THE INTENT, THE BIGGER THE PENALTY.

AND WHAT IS THE PENALTY AT THE MORE BENIGN END?

AN UPSET STOMACH.

BUT IT'S STILL NO FUN, SO WATCH IT. AND LASTLY--

LASTLY...IT IS MY BURDEN TO PEER INTO THE FUTURE. TO SEE THE GRAINS OF SAND THAT LED TO THIS MOMENT, AND FOLLOW THEM TO WHAT IS YET TO HAPPEN.

THAT IS WHAT THOSE *OUTSIDE* ARE WAITING FOR ME TO *TELL* THEM.

WOULD YOU LIKE TO HEAR *YOUR* FUTURES?

SURE. WHY NOT?

VERY WELL.

YOU COME FROM DUST, BUT YOU DID NOT COME ALONE. THE ***WOMAN*** IN ***WHITE*** CAME WITH YOU. THE DUST WANTS YOU ***BACK***, AND ***SHE*** WANTS YOU BACK. THEY ARE ***HUNGRY***, AND THEY WILL ***FOLLOW*** YOU AS LONG AS YOU LIVE, UNTIL THEY ***DEVOUR*** YOU.

BLOOD IS YOUR ONLY DEFENSE. BUT IT ***CANNOT*** BE YOURS AND IT ***WILL NOT*** BE ***HERS.***

FIND THE BLOOD. EVEN KNOWING WHAT IT WILL COST. IT IS YOUR ONLY HOPE OF SURVIVAL.

DOES THAT MAKE ANY SENSE TO YOU?

YES, IT--

YOU SON OF A--

WHAT IS IT?

I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT.

CARLOS--

I SAID I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT.

I WOULD TELL YOUR FUTURE, BUT YOU ALREADY *KNOW* IT. SHE HAS *TOLD* YOU.

YES.

AND YOU ACCEPT?

"YES."

THEN YOU NEED NOTHING MORE FROM ME.

AND SHE THINKS:

HE'S GOING TO KNOW.

NOW, TO YOU--

AND SHE THINKS:

*HE'S GOING TO KNOW WHAT I'M **HERE** FOR...WHAT I'M HERE TO **DO**. AND HE WILL HAVE **HER** KILL ME FOR IT.*

I DO NOT SEE ANYTHING. PERHAPS ANOTHER TIME.

SURE... ANOTHER TIME.

AND SHE THINKS:

OH MY GOD...HE'S A FRAUD. AND I DON'T KNOW WHETHER TO BE RELIEVED OR ANGRY ABOUT IT.

IT HAS BEEN A LONG DAY, BUT I WILL NOT LEAVE UNTIL I HAVE SPOKEN WITH THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN AWAITING MY WORDS.

FAIR ENOUGH. WE'LL WAIT OUTSIDE.

THANK YOU. JULIE WILL OPEN THE DOOR.

I KNOW YOU, MALIK. YOU ALWAYS SEE WHAT'S COMING. WHAT DID YOU SEE IN HER FUTURE?

IT WAS NOT HER FUTURE THAT I SAW, SISTER.

IT WAS MY OWN.

IT WILL BE GOOD TO LEAVE HERE, B. GOOD TO SEE THE SUN AGAIN. GOOD TO HAVE NEW FRIENDS. GOOD TO HAVE YOU WITH ME. I HAVE LIVED A FULL LIFE, AND I AM HAPPY.

TELL JULIE TO SEND IN THE OTHERS.

BUT--

SEND THEM IN.

I AM ALL RIGHT.

THANK YOU FOR ALWAYS BEING THERE.

"ONE THING I STILL DON'T UNDERSTAND, LYRA."

The Pale City. Earlier...

IF YOU AND EVERYONE *LIKE* YOU IN THE *PALE CITY* COULDN'T STOP *DEATH*, THEN WHO *CAN?*

ALL THE MIRRORS HAVE BEEN SHATTERED. PITY, JUST WHEN ONE IS NEEDED MOST.

SORRY...?

NOTHING.

I MEAN, I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU'RE ASSEMBLING AN *ARMY* HERE, AND--

AN ARMY? IS *THAT* WHAT YOU THINK THE *FRONT DOOR* IS ALL ABOUT?

I'M A SOLDIER. IT'S HOW WE SEE THE WORLD.

OF COURSE.

COME WITH ME.

IT'S NOT JUST SOLDIERS WHO THINK THAT WAY. PRESIDENTS, PRIME MINISTERS, KINGS AND QUEENS...THEY THINK OF WARS IN TERMS OF BOMB BLASTS AND BODY COUNTS, TROOP MOVEMENTS, WHO HAS THE HILL TODAY AND WHO WILL HAVE IT TOMORROW.

BUT NOT EVERYONE WHO *LIVES* THROUGH A WAR *FIGHTS* IN THAT WAR.

AND THOSE WHO PLAN *STRATEGIES* THAT ARE ONLY OF THE MOMENT ARE OFTEN BLIND TO WHAT COMES *AFTER.*

THEY FORGET WHAT THEY'RE FIGHTING *FOR* AND *WHY.*

WHEN THE *WAR* IS OVER AND THE *KILLING* IS DONE ON ALL SIDES, THE SURVIVORS WILL EMERGE FROM THE DEBRIS AND ASK--

--"WHAT NOW?"

AND THE *FRONT DOOR* WILL BE THERE.

HERE, STORED AGAINST THE AGES, WE HAVE PRESERVED THE *STORIES*, THE *SONGS*, THE *HOPES* AND *DREAMS* OF MUTANTS AND HUMANS AND ALL THOSE IN BETWEEN.

ART. BEAUTY. PURPOSE. *MEANING.* THEY WILL FIND IT ALL HERE, AT THE *EXACT* MOMENT WHEN THE *DRUMS* HAVE STOPPED, THE *GUNS* ARE SILENCED AND, FOR THE FIRST TIME, THE WORLD WILL BE QUIET ENOUGH AND TIRED ENOUGH TO FINALLY LISTEN TO THE BETTER ANGELS OF THEIR NATURE.

AND HERE, IN THIS PLACE, THEY WILL FIND EVERYTHING THEY NEED TO CREATE A BETTER WORLD, A *KINDER* AND *NOBLER* WORLD.

SHANGRI-LA.

A ROSE BY ANY OTHER NAME.

AND AFTER YOU HAVE RETURNED FROM YOUR JOURNEYS, AFTER THE LAST VOICES HAVE JOINED THE CHORUS--

--ALL OF THIS, THE *FRONT DOOR* ITSELF, WILL BE YOURS: TO SAVOR, TO GUIDE AND TO PROTECT.

WHOA, WAIT. WHY ME?

"WHEN YOU DESTROYED *ASMODAY*, YOU ALTERED THE HIERARCHY OF *HELL* AND THE POWERS THEREIN, FOREVER CHANGING THE SHAPE OF THE *CHESSBOARD*."

"YEAH...STRANGE TOLD ME THERE WOULD BE *CONSEQUENCES*."

THOSE *CONSEQUENCES* PUT YOU ON THE ROAD THAT BROUGHT YOU *HERE*, AND WILL TAKE YOU EVEN FARTHER.

MUCH, *MUCH* FARTHER.

AND THERE'S ONE OTHER REASON I AM OFFERING YOU ALL OF *THIS*.

I HAVE SOMETIMES HEARD YOU CALLED A *MAN OUT OF TIME*.

BUT WE BOTH KNOW THAT'S NOT REALLY TRUE. FACTUAL, YES, BUT NOT *TRUE*. NOT THE *CORE* OF IT... OR OF *YOU*.

THE DEATH OF YOUR *PARENTS* AND THE LOSS OF YOUR *HOME*, OF YOUR *HEALTH*...THEN JUST AS YOU THOUGHT YOU WERE FINALLY *SAFE* AND *STRONG* AND *HOME*--

"--YOU WENT INTO THE DARK AND THE COLD. AND WHEN YOU CAME OUT--

"--THE WORLD YOU KNEW AND THE HOME YOU THOUGHT YOU'D FINALLY ACHIEVED--

"--WAS GONE."

SINCE THEN, YOU HAVE BEEN FOREVER ON THE ***MOVE***, TRYING TO FIND YOUR WAY ***HOME***.

THAT'S WHY YOU BOUGHT THE APARTMENT BUILDING, WHY IT MATTERED SO MUCH TO YOU THAT IT BE RESTORED TO WHAT IT ***WAS***. BECAUSE IT WAS THE ONLY ***HOME*** YOU HAD EVER KNOWN.

BUT WE BOTH KNOW THAT ONE DAY, EVEN ***THAT*** WILL FALL. AND THAT'S WHY I AM OFFERING YOU A PLACE THAT WILL NEVER FALL OR FAIL OR BREAK.

NOT WHILE IT IS UNDER YOUR PROTECTION.

THE PATH YOU HAVE WALKED HAS BEEN LONG AND LONELY AND FULL OF PAIN, THROUGH NO FAULT OF YOUR OWN.

AND THROUGH IT ALL, THERE HAS BEEN NO PLACE TO LAY YOUR HEAD.

I'M NOT GIVING YOU AN ASSIGNMENT OR A MISSION.

I'M GIVING YOU A CHANCE TO COME HOME.

TO HAVE PEACE. TO REST. TO ***BREATHE.*** TO FINALLY LIVE LIFE FULL MEASURE.

AND IN THAT MOMENT, WHEN YOU HEAR THE CALL TO COME HOME AT LAST--

"--DON'T BE LATE."

IT WAS NOT MY *DESIRE* TO KILL YOU.

The Pale City. Now...

YOU WERE MY FRIENDS. MY BRETHREN.

MY FAMILY.

EVEN AS *LYRA* WAS MY FAMILY.

BUT SHE *DELUDED* AND *DECEIVED* YOU, SO YOU WOULD NOT SEE THAT IT IS ONLY BY STARTING *OVER*, BY ERASING THE MISTAKES OF THE *PAST*, THAT WE COULD SERVE OUR PURPOSE BEST.

AND WE WENT TO WAR.

AND AS EACH OF YOU FELL, I WEPT.

BUT IF I DO NOT SEE MY TASK THROUGH TO THE END, YOUR DEATHS WOULD BE IN VAIN.

SO THIS MUST BE FINISHED. NOT BY ANOTHER, BY A SUBSTITUTE OR A CONDUIT.

BUT BY ME...

"...BY ME."

IT HAS BEEN OVER TWO THOUSAND YEARS SINCE THIS WAS NECESSARY. HE IS NO LONGER SURE HE EVEN KNOWS HOW TO DO IT.

HE FORCES HIMSELF TO REMEMBER.

HE **WILLS** HIMSELF TO REMEMBER.

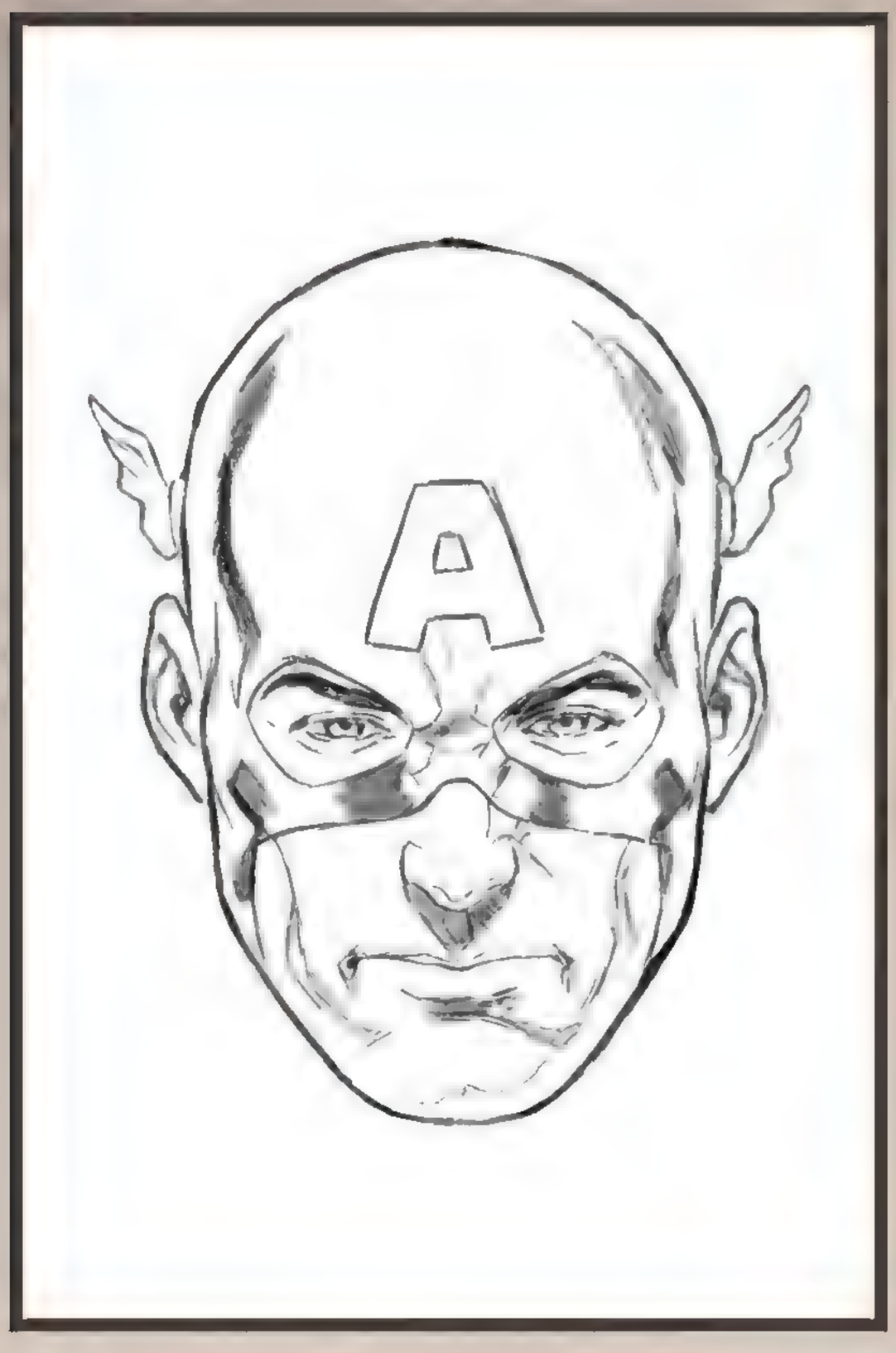
THE MEMORY BRINGS PAIN.

AND FOR THE FIRST TIME IN OVER TWO MILLENNIA--

HE USES IT TO FUEL THE METAMORPHOSIS.

--DEATH WALKS AMONG US.

To be continued...



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